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Fantasy Rules

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Bishop:**

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MARTIAN
GOLD

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By Ray Aldridge

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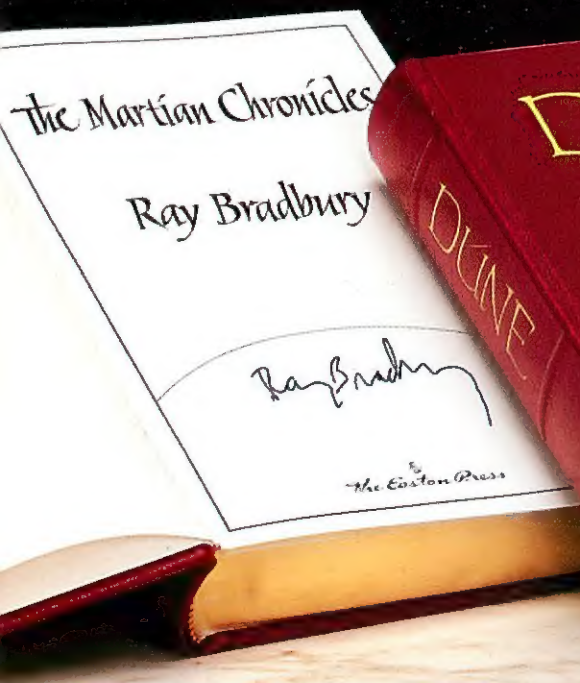
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COVER: The stars will be ours, if not today, then certainly tomorrow. For the latest development in space travel, see Science, beginning page 24. Art by Chris Moore. ABOVE: Bob Eggleton is a master of things alien, as shown by his cover painting for Stephen Baxter's *Raft*. See Gallery, page 78.

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FUSION VIDEO PRESENTS... THE BEST OF DOCTOR WHO & RED DWARF ON VIDEO



THE DALEK INVASION OF EARTH

Attention Doctor Who fans! Another storyline from the Doctor Who vaults has been released! The 2-volume set *The Dalek Invasion of Earth* has been released on demand of the fans. The Tardis has landed in London. A menacing deserted London, with no sign of life and no sense of normality, but the decaying city is not as empty as it seems. The year is 2164 and the travellers soon find themselves facing antagonists whom they thought they had destroyed...The Daleks. They have conquered the Earth. This 1964 black & white release is now out on video for you to enjoy in your own home theater. Don't miss it!

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DOCTOR WHO: MAWDRYN UNDEAD

While the Tardis is trapped inside a huge spaceship in a perpetual orbit around Earth the mysterious Black Guardian plans the death of the Doctor with the help of an English public schoolboy. Meanwhile The Doctor must decide if he should free the miserable Mawdryn and his 8 fellow scientists, all condemned to a state of perpetual regeneration, at the cost of his own powers of regeneration.

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DOCTOR WHO: MASQUE OF MANDRAGORA

Tom Baker stars as the Doctor is really put to the test as he and Sarah Jane are caught up in a power struggle for the Dukedom of San Martino on 15th century Earth. The evil and ancient cult of Demnos is planning to take over the Earth after centuries of waiting.

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The laughs start here with the comic space saga series *Red Dwarf*. A radiation leak aboard the spaceship *Red Dwarf* leaves only one apparent survivor, Lister the Chicken Soup Machine Repair Man. This tape includes the episodes *The End*, *Future Echoes* and *Balance Of Power*, never repeated on TV and never released before on video.

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The original British comedy TV series *Red Dwarf* continues on video. Lister suffers hilarious hallucinations from a space virus. Personifications of his personality begin a battle under a rain of herring and exploding mayors in *Confidence & Paranoia*. This tape also includes *Waiting For God and Me*.

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Laugh along as the crew of the *Red Dwarf* comes to the rescue of three damsels and an asteroid in distress, then experience the new game sensation sweeping the solar system. This tape includes *Kryten*, *Better Than Life* and *Thanks For The Memory*.

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The Crew is in for it again as the *Red Dwarf* travels back in time 3 million years and revisits the loves of Lister's life, then faces a revolt from the ship's backup computer, *Queeg 500*. This tape includes *Stasis Leak*, *Queeg* and *Parallel Universe*.

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Dear *Science Fiction Age*:

Hello from the darkest continent. It's January, and I just bought your November issue. It cost me \$6.50, or in local wall-paper money R22.00 or 4.2 hamburgers (if you don't mind not eating much real meat!), so you've got to be a real fan to buy a science fiction mag here.

There was some good stuff in the mag, but for me it really topped out on Spinrad's essay. I'm kind of biased because Norman Spinrad's *Agent of Chaos*, along with Harry Harrison's *Bill, the Galactic Hero*, was all that got me, the scared and very unwilling conscript, through the brainscrub of the South African military indoctrination system in a semi-sane state.

In the height of my sad country's apartheid era, censorship was very strict, to ensure the minds of the populace were kept at an even bland porridge flavour. But SF, safe in its genre cloak and '30s reputation, was freely on sale. I bought books like the *Illuminatus Trilogy* and *Songs from the Stars* quite openly, although their content would have been pure anathema to the regime.

It is to my mind entirely possible that this and other tiny seeds of rational liberalism prevented the propaganda attack on the minds of the "white" population of this country from succeeding. Without this liberal rationality opening windows of doubt in the propaganda wall, the course towards a final, pyrrhic, genocidal war was sure. It would absolutely certainly have gone nuclear.

Love from the Third World,
Dave Freer
South Africa

Dear Editor:

I suppose you'd expect some complaints regarding biblical themes in your stories, especially from the more "Orthodox" community. Indeed, it would take a narrow mind to superimpose its values on another's creativity. Now I know both sides of that frustration. For what is creativity designed to do, if not awaken and expand its beholder?

The story in question is in the January issue, "Bible Stories for Adults No. 46: Soap Opera" by James Morrow. Actually, I really like the style and think that it would make an excellent short play. I have just one small objection intruding on my "suspension of disbelief." The ending? No. That they reject "God" and call Him a big windbag, and He summarily does nothing doesn't make Him impotent or fallacious. That He appears a little distracted and repetitious doesn't make Him an obsessive old fool with a long life dependent on our cooperation. I interpret these as divine patience at the end,

and a simple caricature of our flawed perception throughout.

What bothers me is that the main character has either been reincarnated or become the Wandering Jew. The last sentence in the real story says, "Job died, old and full of days." I don't find his sudden emergence and lack of faith so entertaining. The real Job presumably knows "why" and is happier than he ever could have been under any earthly circumstances. Why taint that with our modern popular misapprehensions?

By the way, the next story ("The Living God Within" by F. Alexander Brejcha) had a good share of insight in terms of some perspective on how God works and how people can obscure it with even the best intentions.

Sincerely,
Brother James F. Kahl

Dear Mr. Edelman:

Ben Bova's article about bad SF movies and TV shows was great. But he overlooked what is, by far, the worst SF anything—TV show, movie, novel or whatever—ever created: *Captain Planet*. Here is everything Mr. Bova seems to hate and more. All the plot turns on the misuse of futuristic gizmos and gadgets. Science is vilified as the destroyer of humanity. And all the scientists on the show are not just evil, as in *Aliens*; they are greedy, raving, genocidal maniacs. Or they are the ignorant stooges of greedy, raving genocidal maniacs.

And how do our heroes, five teenagers from different corners of the world, combat this evil? Do they use science and go toe to toe with their enemies? No way. They call forth a superhero by utilizing rings given to them by a Druid goddess! These five rings represent the elements. Not the elements listed on the periodic table, mind you. Not with this view of modern science. Instead, the writers turn back the scientific clock 3000 years to the classical elements of earth, wind, fire, water and heart. (Wait a minute. Heart? *HEART*? When did that become an element?)

Unfortunately, *Captain Planet* may be more detrimental to science and science fiction than all other bad SF put together. Most SF, even bad SF, is aimed at adults or general audiences, and its treatment of science still inspires wonder, even when laced with fear. *Captain Planet*, however, is aimed specifically at kids, and its message to them is clear: All science is evil. And if you become a scientist, you are evil, too.

Steven Siferd

Readers—Please let us know how we're doing at: Letters to the Editor, Science Fiction Age, P. O. Box 369, Damascus, MD 20872.

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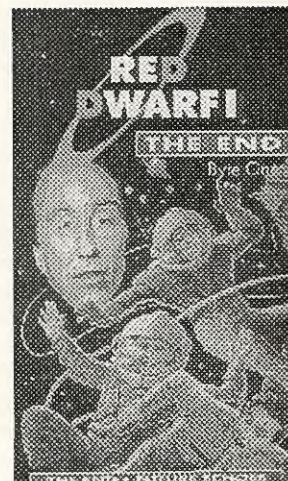
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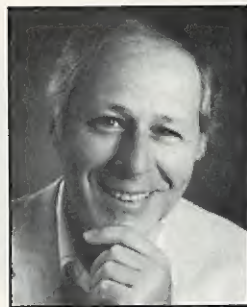
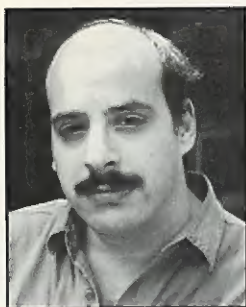
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EDITORIAL

By Scott Edelman

This issue, it's time for you the readers to write the editorial.



Authors of some of our most popular stories, from left to right: Adam-Troy Castro, "The Last Robot"; Ben Bova, "Thy Kingdom Come"; Thomas M. Disch, "A Family of the Post-Apocalypse."

I'VE BEEN WRITING EDITORIALS FOR THIS MAGAZINE for almost two years, but now it's time for something different. In this issue you, the readers of *Science Fiction Age*, get to write the editorial.

Over the past month, I have tabulated the results of the subscriber surveys which thousands of you took the time to return. Your opinions have been very valuable to me. I've learned many fascinating facts, such as your favorite departments (Books and Movies), your feelings about our artwork and design (overwhelmingly positive), and your favorites from among the many stories that we've published so far. Your choices for top 10 stories say a great deal about you as readers, and about us as a magazine.

Those stories, in order of popularity, are:

"The Last Robot" by Adam-Troy Castro. As soon as I read Castro's pastiche homage to the late Asimov, I knew that it had to be the lead story for our first issue. It commemorated the accomplishments of a giant of the field, left me with warm feeling and fond memories, and told a top-notch story.

"The Dragon-Slayer's Sword" by Resa Nelson. With all the brouhaha in our early letter columns about the supposed incompatibility between SF and fantasy, it is fascinating that our second most popular piece of fiction was a fantasy story of swords and dragons. Whether this was because of the fascinating world that Nelson created or the statement the story made about the empowerment of women, or just because everyone loves a shot at dragonslaying, this was one of two fantasies to make this list.

"The Cost of Styxite" by Geoffrey A. Landis and Jorj Strumolo. SF has a long tradition of space opera adventure, and this story, filled with enough bizarre and fully-realized aliens to make the cantina sequence from *Star Wars* look as normal as your local 7-11, scored high with you. Many of you wrote urging us to print further adventures of Churva-Corandierra 20 Geth (3) and Devon Newcastle, and nothing would please us more.

"The Frog Wizard" by Lawrence Watt-Evans. A second fantasy scores high on the list, Watt-Evans's whimsical fantasy of a wizard with a very perplexing and humorous power. This leads me to believe that any uncertainty some of you may have about fantasy is overwhelmed by a high-quality presentation. We will con-

tinue to publish a single fantasy story per issue, as long as it is as good as the ones you've seen so far.

"Thy Kingdom Come" by Ben Bova. Our only story to be serialized across two issues, Bova's story proved somewhat controversial. On the one hand, many of you didn't care to wait two months to find out what happened to Vic and Jade in their gritty future, but at the same time, hundreds of you considered this one of our finest stories.

"Always Falling Apart" by Tony Daniel. Cassie, the protagonist in this story, had to choose between Earth and the stars, a situation many SF readers would love to find ourselves in. Perhaps that is one reason you all found this story so appealing, for at the moment, the only way most of us can reach the stars is through SF and stories like these.

"Puss in Boots" by Ronald Anthony Cross. The gonzo fiction of Cross did well in your ratings, as he took you to the gender-bending planet of Spretzel. Many of you responded favorably on the story's attempt to comment on the relationships between men and women and wanted to see more stories that deal with this mature theme.

"A Tale From the War" by Don Webb. Another space opera, this one somewhat surreal, filled with dead cities and super-scientific weapons. Webb's fiction turns SF into the stuff of dreams, and we are proud to have been able to present him to you more than once.

"A Family of the Post-Apocalypse" by Thomas M. Disch. Some of you thought this a fantasy story, some of you thought it SF, but whatever you thought about where it fell in the gap between the two genres, you obviously liked what you read.

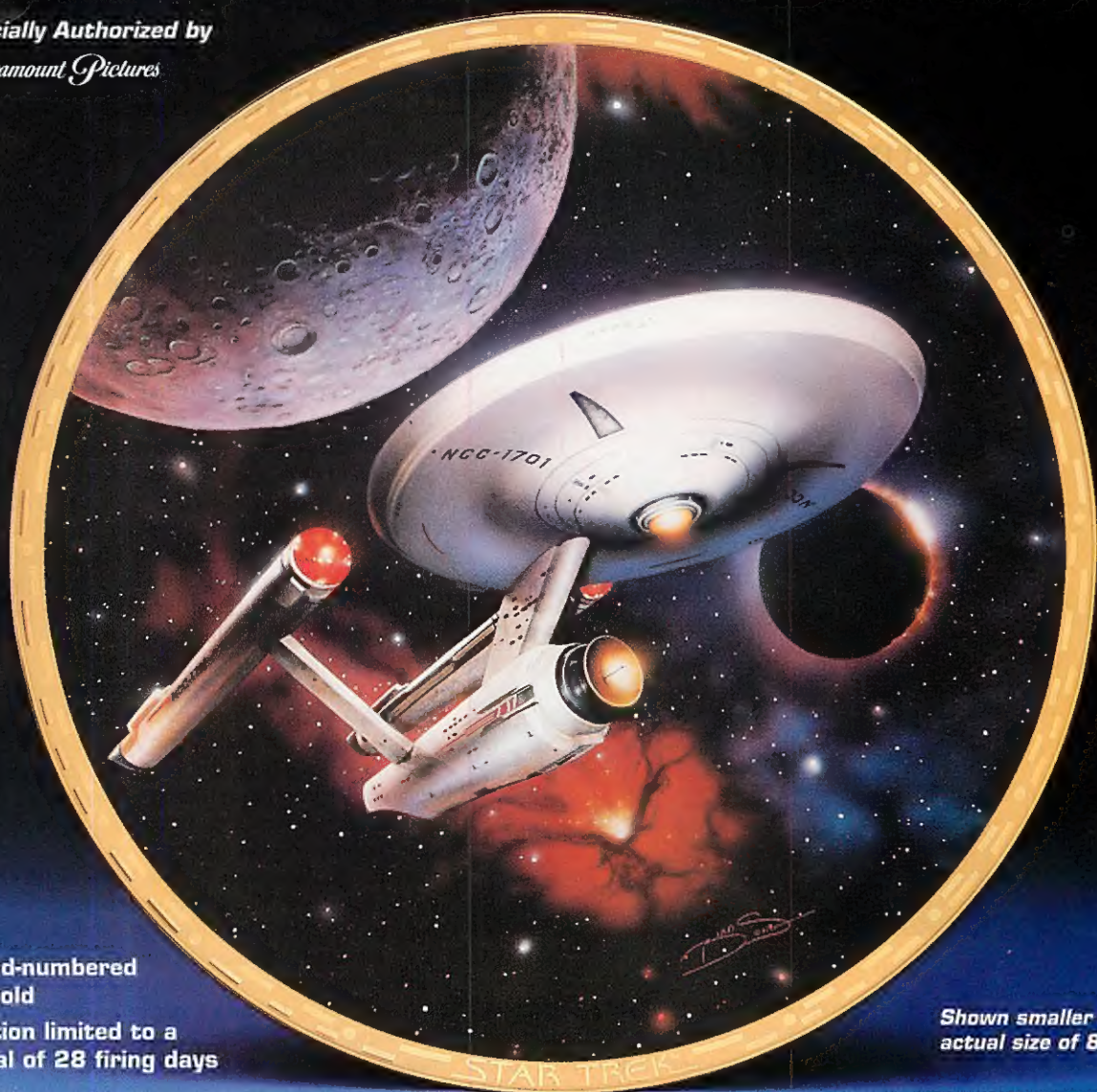
"Undercover" by Gene O'Neill. Was the protagonist of this tale an alien disguised as a old man, or merely an old man starting to lose his mind? Enough of you were taken with this fictional question and O'Neill's presentation of it to put this story among our top 10. This was one of five stories on the list that dealt with aliens.

What are we to learn from all of this? At first glance, these stories appear to be as dissimilar as any 10 stories could possibly be. You've chosen stories focused all over the fictional map, on robots, magicians, space battles, gender wars, cyberpunk, magic swords, the end of the world, the lure of space, and other dissimilar story ingredients and themes.

What does this mean? I think it means we've kept our promise to you. We said that we'd give you the best SF in the universe, regardless of whether it was Old Guard, New Wave, Hard SF, Cyberpunk or whatever future flavor SF develops. And your choices have told us that we were correct. For what we've paid the most attention to is not the sub-category of SF into which each story falls, but rather in giving you stories that have only one thing in common—excellence. Thanks for keeping the faith. I look forward to hearing from you in future years as we attempt to keep going forward just as we've begun—with a tradition of excellence. □

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BOOKS

By Michael Bishop

Kim Stanley Robinson's Martian chronicles continue with yet another masterpiece.



Robinson's terraforming of the red planet is the *War and Peace* of SF. Cover art by Don Dixon.

OVER A YEAR AGO, REVIEWING THE FIRST VOLUME of Kim Stanley Robinson's three-decker saga of Martian colonization, I wrote, "If the next two installments attain the quality of *Red Mars*—and why shouldn't they?—this ambitious series may come to stand as the *War and Peace* of science fiction extravaganzas." Having read the second volume, I would repeat this declaration while striking its last word in favor of chronicles or novels. The tag *extravaganzas*, after all, strongly connotes elements of flamboyance, trickery, and even self-boasting hucksterism, which Robinson earnestly shuns in *Red Mars* and this strapping continuation.

Like its forerunner volume, *Green Mars* (Bantam Books, 1994, 552 pp.; hardcover, \$22.95; trade paperback, \$12.95) plays the hard science game wholly by the rules (or else finesses them so expertly that only a rocket scientist is apt to notice). For Robinson has clearly steeped himself in, and mastered, nearly every piece of Martian fact and lore available for scrutiny at this point in our species' home-based exploration of the solar system. He has dipped into, if not totally immersed himself in, such diverse scientific disciplines as hydrology, medicine, astrophysics, economics, geology, materials science, plate tectonics, botany, spherics, psychology (individual and crowd), and even (oxymoron or no) political science. In fact, I predict that when our kind inevitably sends a real human expedition to Mars, the mission's organizers—NASA or whoever—will early on

suggest Robinson's Mars books as preparatory reading. That's no pie-in-the-sky jive, either.

Let me hasten to add that *Green Mars* does not read like a textbook. Robinson knows that history, even future history of the vast world-settling and -building variety, consists of many individual human actions. Thus, his novel's staggering sweep of events, in some ways reminiscent of the breadth of vision in Stapledon's *Star Maker* or *Last and First Men*, registers with us—as it must, to work as narrative—in terms of graspable human conflicts and achievements.

At least eight characters from the famous First Hundred, who figure crucially in *Red Mars*, reappear here as significant actors in the struggle to terraform, or "aeroform," the planet; the first novel's anti-aging treatments have kept them feisty well beyond the century mark. Among them, welcome as much for their distinguishing character quirks as for their familiarity, are Hiroko Ai, founder of the hidden colony, now called Zygote, that after the failed rebellion of 2061 gives sanctuary to many of her colleagues; the indefatigable Nadia Cherneshevsky, who corrals the trust of all the various factions of the demimonde, or rebel underground, and who ultimately mediates a planetwide "velvet revolution"; the retired psychotherapist Michel Duval; Saxifrage Russell, perhaps the most brilliant scientific mind of the First Hundred, a man of manifold talents; Ann Clayborne, notorious for her unyielding opposition to terraforming; the wily stowaway Desmond, better known as the Coyote; and Maya Toitovna, who obsesses over her ambiguous role in the murder of John Boone, first man to set foot on Mars, and strives to atone for it by urging upon her fellow dissidents caution, prudence, and restraint: qualities at odds with her own temperament. It's good to see these folks again, even along with the villainous Phyllis Boyle (briefly, in *Red Mars*, the running-dog president of the Transnational Authority throttling the planet), and even better to see them evolve, not without perplexity and strain, in near-synch with the gradual but unflagging transformation of Mars itself.

But Robinson has the good sense, given that this book must bridge the chasm between Mars as an empty desert and its future status as the home of sailable oceans, to introduce several new characters. In *Green Mars*'s opening chapter, he traces for us the extraordinary childhood of Nirgal (whose name means Mars in an Earthly tongue) in Zygote, Hiroko's hidden ice dome near the south pole. A long-limbed ectogene—a being decanted rather than born—Nirgal has 11 sansei "siblings" who go to classes with him and dwell in dormitories made of sectioned stalks of giant bamboo. Nirgal learns early on that *veriditas*, his mother Hiroko's concept of a "holy greening power," resides in him as well as in the cosmos at large. Indeed, unlike his siblings, Nirgal has a strange talent, that of physically warming others, which later translates into a Davidic charisma useful to the demimonde's efforts to unseat the meta-

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nationals controlling the new space elevator and thus the planet.

In giving this ability to Nirgal, though, Robinson seems to commit a small sin against rigorous scientific explanation—an uncharacteristic dip into the mystical—that he avoids nearly everywhere else. This slip-up, if it is one, appears weirdly capricious in view of the fact that after the first of the 10 parts of *Green Mars*, Nirgal never blatantly employs it again—except, maybe, in a bout of open-air lovemaking with Jackie Boone, a fellow ectogene. So, even though I have no personal animus toward mystical intrusions and mention it only because it runs counter to Robinson's prevailing method, I suspect that he has a science-based rationale in mind for this manifestation of *viriditas* within Nirgal and a narrative surprise focused on it in the works for *Blue Mars*. If he doesn't, my quibble grows an untrimmed beard, but remains a quibble.

Other than Nirgal, the only other major character original to *Green Mars* hails from...Earth. Art Randolph, an employee of the transnational called Praxis, receives from his 112-year-old chief, William Fort, a clandestine ambassadorship to the Martian underground. During a round robin of secret seminars—somewhere in the Pacific?—Fort propounds his personal economic theories and weighs the reactions of Art and six other Praxis candidates for this unofficial post. Fort's acute observation that altruism is "selfishness taking the long view" leads him to dispatch Art to Mars, to "acquire" it, and eventually finds pragmatic expression in the seven "work points for a Martian government" that Art and Nirgal distill from the mish-mash of arguments, bitter and otherwise, vented at a "constitutional congress" in the demimonde city Dorsia Brevia. I like Art as much as I like Nadia, the great conciliator and builder; his advent as a fellow architect of unity and independence enriches *Green Mars*, as does the maturation into leader and ecological engineer of his contact, Nirgal.

No more character chit-chat or incidental plot summary. As in *Red Mars*, Robinson loads this follow-up with ore, whether in the form of hair-raising events, provocative scientific and/or philosophical hypotheses, breathtaking visual tableaux, or seemingly offhand, but in reality intelligently undergirded, extrapolations about 22nd-century history on Earth as well as on Mars. *Green Mars* includes a funny demonstration of the gift economy; an eerie ghost town of alabaster statues; a one-line salute to C.S. Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet*; a debate about ecopoiesis, or the viability of leaving Mars in a natural state at its higher elevations; astute ruminations about the allure of conspiracy theories; the rebels' premeditated jettisoning of Mars's second moon, Deimos; the calamitous breaking-up of the West Antarctic ice sheet on Earth; a dramatic flood reminiscent of the one that plays

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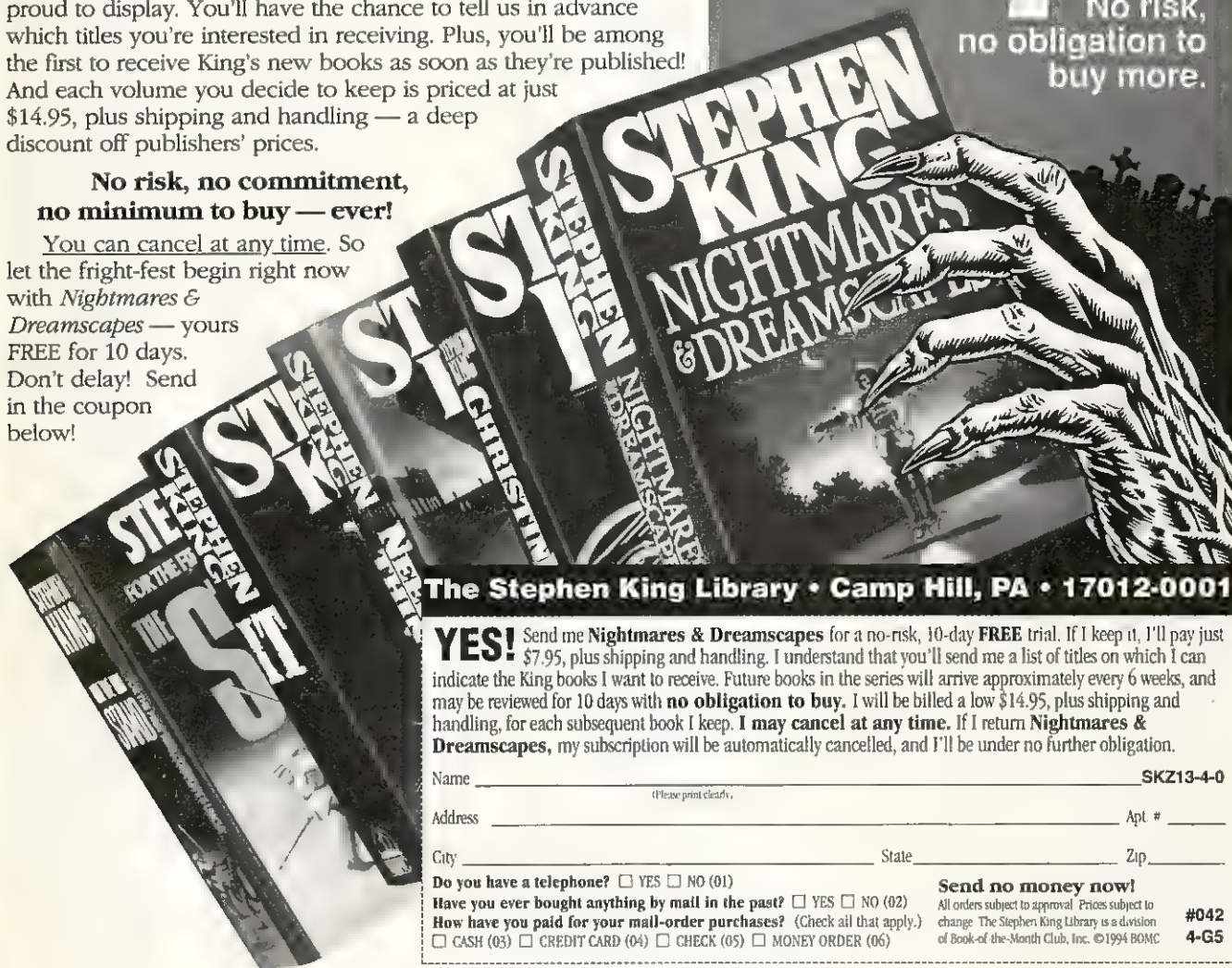
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such a determining role at the end of *Red Mars*; a "phase change" in the sociohistorical climate of these new Martians; and so much more that I quail—again—before the task of describing, or simply listing, it all.

Deep into *Green Mars*, Maya Toitovna muses, "Whatever the future brought would be a surprise to her.... No one could imagine the future. A blank there in her mind meant nothing; it was normal." Will the colonization and terraforming of Mars proceed as Robinson has presented it here, in general outline if not in nitpicky specific detail? Probably not. No one can accurately imagine the future. The cascading recombinant chaos of history precludes accuracy.

But Kim Stanley Robinson—in *Red Mars*, *Green Mars*, and probably *Blue Mars* too—has imagined his future Mars with such care and apparent verisimilitude that no would-be chronicler of the fictive colonization of our solar system can ignore his achievement. He has planted his colors on a world that most of us long ago ceded to Ray Bradbury. Although Robinson's not the sort to begrudge others access, I can't imagine anybody else staking out any portion of this

immemorial dreamscape with the same elegant detail and thoroughness. It's *his*, now and for a long time to come.

Unconquered Countries, by Geoff Ryman, St. Martin's Press, April 1994, 288 pages, \$20.95.

Any story in this four-novella collection needs a thousand-word review of its own, at a minimum, and "The Unconquered Country" could use two or three times that. The title story, which won the World Fantasy Award, is well known. It is the story of a young woman named Third Child, because her parents wanted to make sure she wouldn't be eaten by a tiger. But her Unconquered Country suffers conqueror after conqueror. It is easily recognizable as Cambodia, invaded by Vietnam and by America, finally invaded from within by its own war-torn young, until it is eaten from within. This Country, though, lies on the map somewhere between SF and magic realism. Here houses are living creatures that die of mourning if they lose their families; here women must sell their bodies to birth biological weapons, biomechanical parts, earnest liv-

ing advertisements. Seen through the double lenses of historical memory and dream, the Country is impossible and convincing, strange and homey.

Third Child is not eaten. She suffers loss after loss, of her home, her sisters, her mother, her childhood. She sells her body and nearly sells her eye. She meets a young soldier of the People who woos her with patience and kindness, and for a time she hopes for a new life. She settles into premature widowhood, a country girl exiled to the city, which collapses when the rest of the Country does.

Yet the title is not false. Through dislocation, fear, and bitterness, Third somehow keeps an unconquered country in her soul. The final journey of genocide is not a defeat but a return for her; the People will not be conquered in her heart and memory. The lovely dignity of Ryman's writing carries the same message.

Each story pulls characters through devastation, loss, and emotional traps. The other genocide novella, the fierce "O Happy Day!", posits a repressive-feminist (think Catherine McKinnon) Final Solution to a violent culture: men are the violence makers. So women have taken over, and are killing them. Some gay men are protecting their own lives by becoming collaborators; so that the women will not have to dirty their hands, men who are presumed not to be as bad as the other men get to unload the bodies from the death trains.

It's a story that could be taken, wrongly, I think, as a blanket condemnation of feminism. But what the story works into is a study of fear and alienation, a condemnation of Final Solutions that destroy those who try to impose them. Roles are blurred, villain and victim, and only those who refuse to surrender to imposed roles can be human.

The other two stories are published here for the first time. "Please Say Hello" is a loving, affecting character study of a young woman who must lose the pop-star idol who has made her gray life on the dole bearable, in order to move on and take up her own life.

Ryman describes "A Fall of Angels," in his afterword, as his first ambitious work; it was meant for *Unknown Worlds*, but lost its chance there when the editor left. It's the sort of story one wants to read in hard-sf venues and too rarely does, full of exotic invention, spanning centuries and stars, human history and alien contact, with a clever bit of subatomic-physics gimmickry that convinces well enough to sustain the story.

Already by 1976, though, Ryman was suspicious of ultimate answers that impose meaning and order on people's lives from outside. His narrators are Z, a human technologically transubstantiated into an Angel, an energy being meant to serve mankind's new high purposes; and Toni, a scientist at a planetary outpost who is writing a paper (as the story is subtitled) "On the Possibility of Life Under Extreme Conditions". Both suffer loss and

BOOKS TO WATCH FOR

Igniting the Reaches, by David Drake (Ace). The creator of *Hammer's Slammers* turns his hand to a different Drake, Sir Francis, that is, and translates his life into a SF novel based on the destroyer of the Spanish Armada and the first Englishman to circumnavigate the globe.

ReDiscovery: A Novel of Darkover, by Marion Zimmer Bradley and Mercedes Lackey (DAW). The long-awaited novel of Terran and Darkovan contact by two masters of fantasy. Fans of Darkover can rejoice, for at last the best-selling hardcover is out in paperback.

Adventures of the Rat Family, by Jules Verne (Oxford University Press). A rediscovered fairy tale by the father of science fiction. Never before published in English, this is a surprising story of magicians and talking animals instead of the usual submarines and rockets.

Future Quartet, by Bova, Pohl, Pournelle and Sheffield (Morrow). Each author wrote essays on his imagined future, with Sheffield optimistic, Pohl pessimistic, Bova cautiously pessimistic and Pournelle cautiously optimistic, and then wrote novellas set in those imagined futures. Now it's time for the readers to choose up sides.

Galactic Dreams, by Harry Harrison (Tor). A collection of classics from the creator of Bill, the Galactic Hero, featuring a new, never-before published exploit of that lunatic space soldier. The volume is prefaced by fascinating autobiographical musings on this writer's peripatetic life.

Some of Your Blood, by Theodore Sturgeon (Carroll & Graf). This 1961 novel of a blood-drinking psychotic is back in print at last, showing that wherever King and others have gone, this Hugo and Nebula Award winning author was there first. There is no such thing as bad Sturgeon.

Strange Angels, by Kathe Koja (Delacorte). Her stunning novels such as *Bad Brains* straddle the fence between SF and horror. This first short story collection demonstrates a unique voice that delivers opalescent Faulknerian prose and a highly-charged sensuality every time.

Dr. Dimension #2, by John DeChancie & David Bischoff (Roc). In a second adventure that may be even funnier than the first, Dr. Dimension and his crew of intrepid explorers battle the evil Empress Estrogena and the diabolical Baron Skulrak for control of the known universe.

Star Wreck #6: Geek Space Nine, by Leah Rewolinski (St. Martin's). The *Star Trek* spoofery continues as Rewolinski turns her acerbic eye to the latest incarnation of everybody's favorite SF dynasty. Designed only for Trekkers who believe that nothing is sacred.

Five Hundred Years After, by Steven Brust (Tor). Khaavren, Pel, Aerich and Tazendra are at last reunited, 500 years after the events of Brust's best-selling novel *The Phoenix Guard*. Return once more to the Dragaeran Empire for a battle to save the Imperial Orb itself.

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disillusionment. What they gain in self-understanding, Ryman makes us believe, is greater. "Some things never change. Perhaps all conditions are extreme," Toni concludes.

Probably, Ryman writes with peculiar optimism: he demonstrates no hope that life in general can get better, or that people can be other than awkward, hungry, knotty creatures. What he does suggest is that people can learn to grow more true to themselves: the possibility of life even under extreme conditions.

Martha Soukup

The Fourth Guardian, by Ronald Anthony Cross, Tor Books, trade paperback, 448 pages, \$14.95.

The modern conspiracy novel is younger than science fiction, with which it has nowadays become tenuously allied. True, various more-or-less factual conspiracies with literary appendages have existed for centuries: consider, as just one example, the original Rosicrucian mystery begun in 1604, with the publication of an anonymous broadside, *The Fama*. But as game-playing, literary artifacts, conspiracy novels are a relatively recent art form. These calculated exercises in paranoia owe their existence to the irrational events of a turbulent century, events which frequently stagger the imagination and beg for a rational explanation, however perverse.

The new novel by Ronald Anthony Cross—*The Fourth Guardian*, which is Book One of the *Eternal Guardian* series—is not a conspiracy novel, although it is touted explicitly as such, with blurbs linking it to the *Illuminatus!* trilogy. Rather, it belongs to a parallel, superficially similar strain of SF, one exemplified by certain works of Alfred Bester, Philip Jose Farmer, Keith Laumer and, most crucially, Roger Zelazny.

Cross's book cannot be considered a conspiracy novel because, for one thing, there is simply not enough history in it. The vast majority of the action takes place in the present. Past events of both personal and global significance are alluded to extremely sparsely. Not until page 405(!) do we really learn that Cross's immortals have influenced world history (one unleashed the Black Death, for instance), but by then it's a case of too little, too late—even considering that this is the first book in a series. One cannot really believe in Cross's four ancient Romans (granted long life and psychic powers by the possession of fragments of a mysterious stone) as the secret masters of our world. It's a simple case of not enough circumstantial evidence.

Cross lays practically all his plot cards on the table right from the beginning. Except for a couple of cases of hidden identity, nothing is unknown about either the goals or motives of the major players. The character named Brice, an average guy caught up in the struggle, might have served the role of the innocent outlined above, except that he is onstage only a fraction of the time. (Herky-jerky point-of-view switching is a minor annoyance in the book.)

Given all these missing pieces, *The Fourth Guardian* simply cannot work as a conspiracy novel. But it does work most efficiently and cleverly and pulse-poundingly as a non-stop, rousing tale of action and battle, on both the material and psychic planes.

By choosing to start his story at the point when the mystery stones appear to be trying to change owners, Cross ensures a chaotically fertile milieu. Everything is up for grabs, and 2,000 years of "stability" are coming to an end.

The immortal we are inclined to be most sympathetic to, and who dominates most of the narrative, is Corbo, an ex-gladiator, nowadays known simply as the Old Man, who is accompanied by his apprentice, Elena, an adopted Latina young woman. As Corbo precipitates the book's climactic blowup by forcing the hands of his fellow immortals, simultaneously grooming Elena to take his place, the reader is treated to a whirlwind of (slightly episodic) action. From an extradimensional slugfest in a supermarket, to a *Treasure of the Sierra-Madres*-style

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chase in the mountains of Mexico, to a very King-like siege of a small town (recall King's "The Mist"), Cross propels his battered characters to the limits of their endurance and mettle, never letting up for a moment.

Readers who know Cross's fine short fiction and have a notion of his writing as being marked by what I call a "hard-edged whimsy" are in for something of a shock with this book. Gone is the whimsy, and only the edge is left. It seems as if Cross has deliberately stripped his writing down to the bare admonishing bones. Sentences and chapters are short and tough, not to mention a trifle ugly at times. There are many deaths in this book, none of them pretty, and Cross is not afraid to wipe out apparently major characters.

Unlike the opening salvos of many series, this book is entirely satisfying and conclusive on a stand-alone basis, yet remains dynamically poised to jumpstart future machinations. With a new generation of

Continued on page 87



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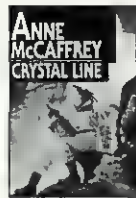
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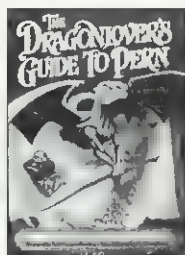
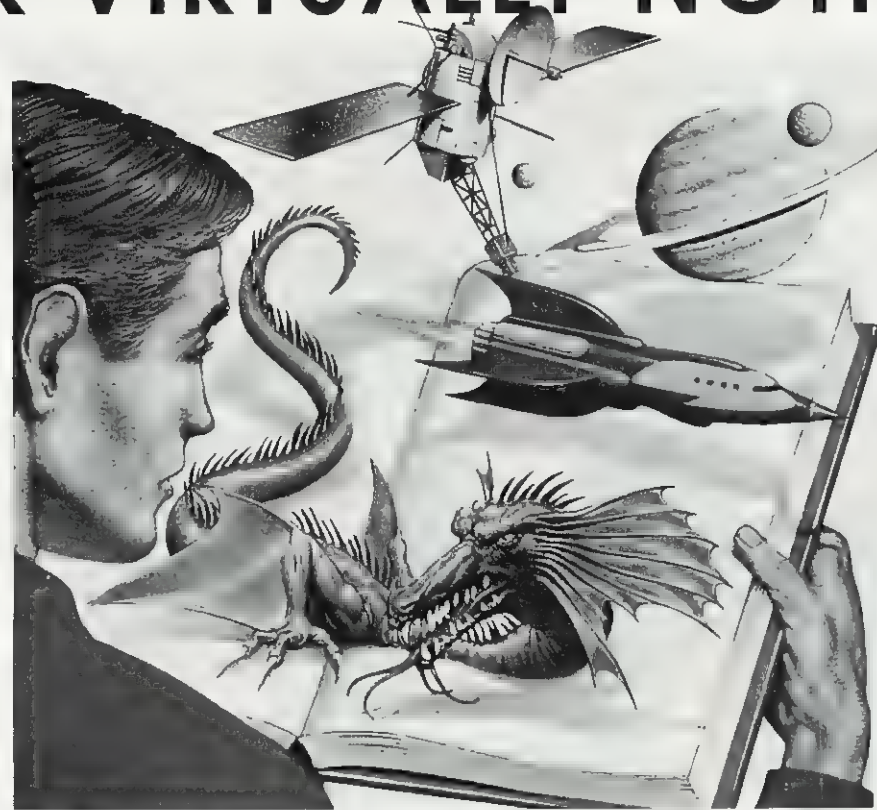
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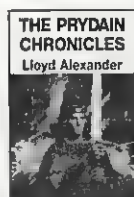
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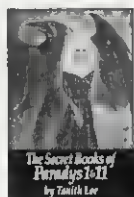
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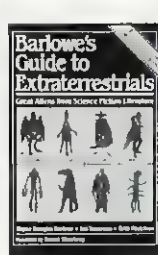
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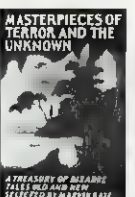
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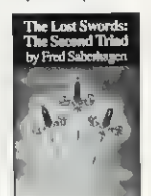
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SFA 5/94

MOVIES

By Mike Mayo

Successful low-budget SF film-making is itself an act of science fiction.



In John Ellis' film, *Invader*, "Big Harvey" is a 50 foot tall alien robot designed by John Poreda. Photo by Phillip J. Cook.

THE WORLD OF LOW-BUDGET SCIENCE FICTION movies isn't an easy place to make a living.

Filmmakers who choose to work in it spend much of their time trying to spin straw into gold, creating visual miracles on microscopic budgets. There's never quite enough money, and efforts to raise more are virtually constant.

With three films under his belt and a fourth in the planning stages, John Ellis is a low-budget veteran. When we sat down to talk about his work, he had just been sending out letters to investors in his most recent project, explaining what was happening. The fact that one of his backers had just gone into Chapter 11 bankruptcy didn't make it any easier.

But then, nothing had been easy for Ellis recently. Even getting to the interview was tricky. On the day we'd arranged, there were quakes and aftershocks in California where his kids live, and painful record cold in the Washington, D.C. area had killed his car's battery. Add in an ice storm, snow, and impassable roads and you've got *The Interview That Was Not Meant To Be*.

But we persevered and managed to find a restaurant we could both reach near the Pentagon, an institution that Ellis had taken some liberties with in his most recent release, *Invaders*.

But that's getting ahead of the story. His interest in science fiction films had, he admitted, a curious beginning—*When Dinosaurs Ruled the Earth*. When that venerable Hammer B-movie was first released, he saw it five times in five days. But it wasn't the leather bikinis that caught his interest; it was Jim Danforth's stop-motion special effects.

Ellis went straight home and made a *Tyrannosaurus rex* out of metal and foam rubber. Today, he's 30-something, with long red hair and beard, and an earring dan-

gling from his left lobe. And he still loves good special effects and science fiction.

After his *T-rex*, he said, "I started as an illustrator, sold my first freelance piece of artwork in 1969, did a lot of *Science News* artwork covers." That led to work in commercial television in Washington, D.C.

"I did stuff for armed forces, network TV, shoes, toothpaste commercials, vacuum cleaners, both at Broadcast Arts and Taylor Made Images, both defunct now, sometimes as a flunky, sometimes the driving force." The work involved animation, special effects and live action, and it gave him the skills he needed to consider moving into feature-length projects.

"When you're doing commercials, you get a sense of presentation because there is a product that is being sold—whether goods and services or a concept—and you learn to present it in a way that the audience identifies with it instantly. Sometimes you want somebody to say 'What's that?', but usually you want people to get it instantly."

In 1979, he and his associate Philip Cook decided to take the plunge. In Baltimore, they'd seen and worked on the ultra-low budget films *Night Beast* and *Galaxy Invader* with Don Dohler and thought they could do better. "Phil and I both knew that we had the raw talent to do it. As an illustrator I knew I could make any props."

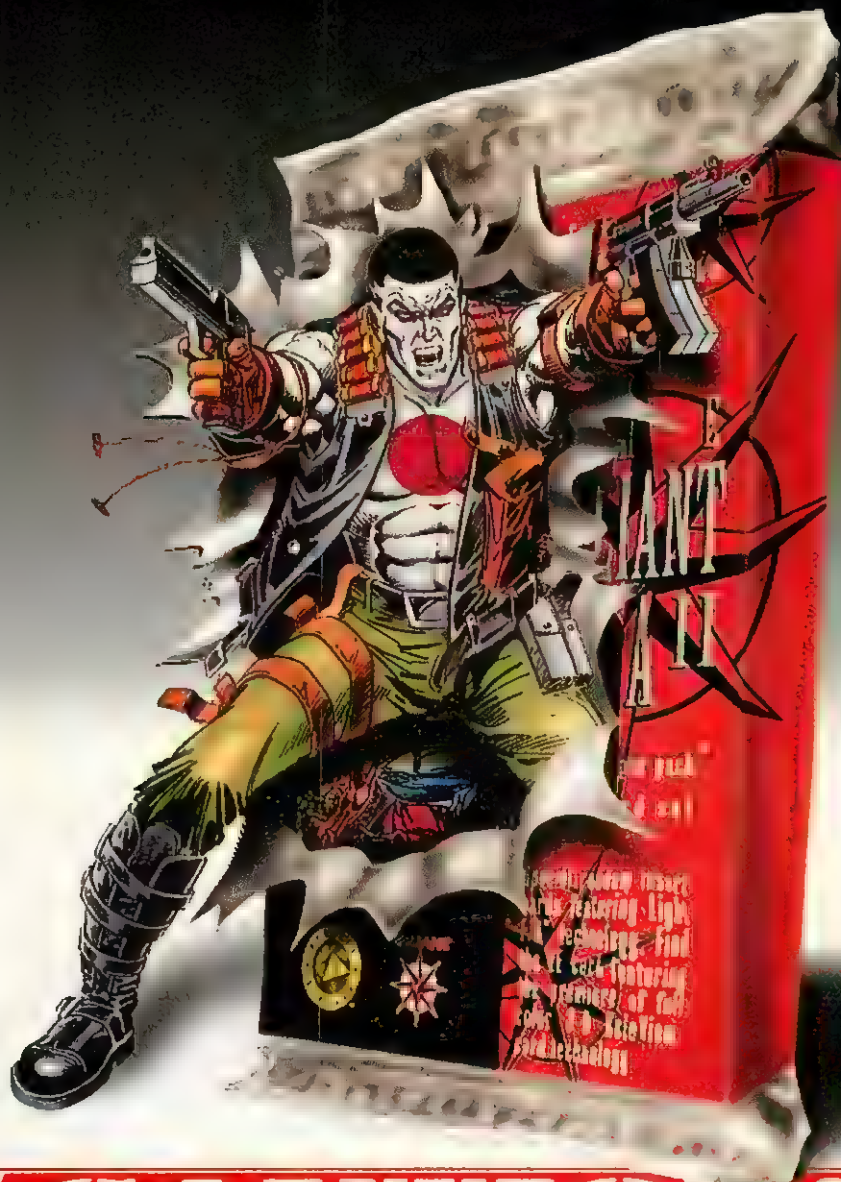
Their first effort together was *Star Quest*, which Cook wrote and directed and Ellis produced. "There was a total envelope on that film," he said. "The whole look of it was put together by Phil Cook, myself and John Poreda, who did the majority of the design work. That film was pretty much Phil's vision. It was his original story, but we were feeling our way."

"It was a combination of special effects to establish locations and clever lighting on Phil's part to interconnect our sets with the miniature effects. We tried to root it in reality. Whether we succeeded or not is not for me to say."

Actually, they did pretty well. Science fiction readers will catch the influences of Robert Heinlein's *Friday* and Frederick Pohl's Heechee novels in the story of Pentan (Tracy Davis), a genetically engineered hitwoman who rebels against her corporate owners and searches for the wreck of an alien spacecraft.

The film was made in Northern Virginia. Live action scenes were done in a concrete tunnel at the Pentagon and on an interstate highway overpass. A barren field near the small town of Culpeper became the planet Elysium. But the most memorable moments were created in a 40-by-45-foot corner of a warehouse, where the sets were constructed and the special effects were photographed.

Ellis and Cook used every trick they could come up with to save money. They scavenged lumber from a nearby dumpster to build their sets, and since they shared the warehouse with a juice distributor, the place stank of fetid oranges.



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In *Star Quest: Beyond the Rising Moon*, this elaborate miniature set designed by John Poreda is an atmosphere processing station on the poisonous planet Inisfree.

Despite those handicaps, they got what they were after in visual terms. The interplanetary and aerial sequences look good. They move quickly without obvious trickery. The sound dubbing isn't as successful. Too often the voices sound like they come from a dubious Italian import.

Still, *Star Quest* does enough things right that Ellis and Cook screened a 35mm print at the Cannes Film Festival. From that, they

got a fair review in *Variety* and made a smattering of sales. The special effects work they did on the film was described in detail in the May 1990 issue of *Cinefantastique*, and Phil Cook wrote an article about the technical aspects of his contribution in the September 1989 issue of *American Cinematographer*.

More importantly, *Star Quest* also got them in touch with people working in the distribution end of the business. They put

together another film package, but couldn't find studio backing for it.

Again, Cook and Ellis decided to do it on their own. Though the project began with the title *The Killing Edge*, it finally became *Invader*. Reminiscent of a good 1950s B-movie, it's an imaginative story of UFOs and military cover-ups that's told with humor and some terrific stop-motion effects involving a robot called Big Harvey.

But their money problems wouldn't go away. They lost an investor in the stock market crash, and it took a last-minute infusion of cash from legendary low-budget movie producer Menachem Golan to finish the film. Given the realities of the home video market, where *Invader* made its debut in this country, they had to approach it differently.

"Phil Cook and I wanted to make *Star Quest* entertaining but not offensive," Ellis explained, "so it's pretty tame, PG or whatever. With *Invader*, the word came down that it was supposed to be R-rated. That would improve the money we made from it. So we put a lot of [strong] language in it. One guy gets shot in the Pentagon cafeteria and you actually see blood squirt out."

The language and violence still are mild compared to many contemporary videos, and the film's restraint did nothing to hurt it in the marketplace. Ellis said that Vidmark "sold 30,000 cassettes right out of the gate" when they'd been expecting a demand for something like 12,000 tapes.

After *Invader*, Cook and Ellis thought it

TIM SULLIVAN: SF WRITER AND MOVIE MOGUL

TIM SULLIVAN LEADS A DOUBLE LIFE. Most Science Fiction fans know him only as a writer and editor. This makes sense, for in his 15 years as a professional in the print genres, he has been a visible presence, turning out seven well-received novels, including *The Parasite War* and *Martian Viking*, 30 short stories, and such theme anthologies as *Tropical Chills* and *Cold Shocks*.

But thanks to fellow SF writer S. P. Somtow, Sullivan has also found a second career as actor and screenwriter. Somtow, who himself has second careers as composer and filmmaker, put together a horror film titled *The Laughing Dead*. The movie, which featured Sullivan's acting debut as a maniacal priest, developed a cult following due to the appearance of many SF luminaries. Aside from Sullivan, the film contained authors such as Ed Bryant, David Bischoff and Tim Powers whose characters were all fiendishly murdered.

"I owe it all to Somtow in a way," said Sullivan. "I'd done a little acting years ago. He called me up one day in '88 or '89 when I was living in Philadelphia. He said, 'I want you to star in this movie.' Somtow kept

calling me. I thought he'd gone completely insane."

After his role in *The Laughing Dead*, Sullivan remained in California not only



Author/actor Tim Sullivan decks Randall Shepherd in *Twilight of the Dogs*.

because he'd been bitten by the acting bug, but because "on the pay I got, I couldn't afford to come back East so I stayed out here. My next film was called *Angel of Passion*. I played a wealthy geek, a stupid rich guy whose girlfriend runs off with a muscle man. This was in '90 or '91. It was not a very rewarding experience. I've never actually seen the whole film. It's got a lot of

breasts in it. Not mine, though.

"I then did a rewrite on a picture called *In A Moment of Passion*, directed by Zbigniew Kaminski. It was a suspense thriller and had Maxwell Caulfield, Jeff Conaway, and Martin Sheen's brother, Joe Estevez. Then I sold a script called *Without A Thought*. It's a suspense thriller about a woman torn between two guys, one of who's a good cop and one of who's a murderer. This was '89. I never got paid. If any of your readers would like to finance it..."

"Then I was mucking about over at Disney, but it didn't work out. Most of my history in film is things that didn't work out. I tried to sell them a couple of different premises, one of which was based on my novel *The Parasite War*. There was some interest from Stuart Gordon on that, but not enough."

Sullivan's film career turned around when he ran into John Ellis, whom he knew from SF fandom from the days when he had lived in Washington, D.C. "He was kind of on the outs with his partner," said Sullivan, "and we talked about doing something, and after many long phone conversations about *Mad Max*, David Koresh, mutated spiders

would be easier to get money to make another film, but once again found that was not the case. According to Ellis, the rules had been changing: "They say, now you have to make three films to be taken seriously in Hollywood." So, they started out on their third film, again spinning straw into gold from individual investors.

But as they were beginning to put the film together, the industry's most famous bugaboo, "creative differences," cropped up, and Ellis and Cook decided to work on separate projects.

Ellis then found himself filling the roles of both producer and director on *Twilight of the Dogs*.

The two jobs don't really complement each other. "They're two different hats," Ellis said, "and they can conflict. The producer runs the show as far as money and setting it up until the director walks onto the set. The producer can be a bastard; the director can't be. When I yell at people on the set as director, they know I'm not mad. I'm just trying to get everybody energized. The director can't afford to be a bad guy."

In both roles, "you've got to juggle the money and juggle the people to get the movie made."

In the world of low-budget filmmaking, those juggling acts are never easy. On the basic nuts-and-bolts level of daily work, Ellis expressed complete admiration for and dependence on the other people who do so

Continued on page 33

and alien super-science, we actually ended up doing it! I'm not too interested in going to 20th Century Fox and going through all the horror shows you've heard about. I'd rather work on the independent level. I just did a low-budget production of *A Midsummer's Night Dream*. It's got Timothy Bottoms in it. I play Oberon as sort of a homeless version of Dracula. There's a lot of gothic punk to it. The pair of lovers are not a pair of ancient Athenians, they're really LA street punks, and then these supernatural creatures show up, Oberon and Titania. They're sort of homeless people, but they have this mystical quality to them."

Even though *Invaders* may mark Sullivan's big break, he hasn't turned his back on fiction. "I'm still writing prose. I had stories in the anthologies *The Ultimate Witch* and *The Ultimate Dracula*. I also had a novel out last year titled *The Lords of Creation*, from AvoNova books. I did six books with them, counting the two anthologies."

But John Ellis is making sure that Sullivan doesn't stray too far from the silver screen. Their next project, *Starfarer Jack*, a space opera with a psionic twist, set on spaceships and alien planets, is now in the planning stages.

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The DC-X, the world's first fully reusable vertical takeoff and landing vehicle, on its maiden voyage, August 18, 1993.

SCIENTISTS, SCIENCE FICTION FANS AND OTHER lovers of the cosmos have all long agreed (since before it became *Star Trek's* motto) that space is the final frontier. Occasionally, however, there is disagreement on just how to get there. Recent testing of an experimental rocket known as the DC-X (the Delta Clipper-Experimental) may change how you think about the standard methods we use to break free of earth's gravity. We recently brought together a panel of experts to discuss the results of this experiment and the coming changes that might occur as a result of this innovative technology.

Aside from publishing both fiction and nonfiction in the pages of this magazine and elsewhere, Dr. Arlan Andrews, Sr. recently completed a stint in the White House Science Office, where he arranged the first briefing on the DC-X project for the incoming Clinton administration. Marianne Dyson is a former NASA flight controller who is now editing *Spacecause News*, the national newsletter of a pro-space lobby group, and serving as Coordinator of the National Space Society's Southwest Regional Chapter. Aside from his scientific and SF credentials, Geoffrey A. Landis flew his first model rocket at 13, and went on to become a member of the U.S. Team to the Model Rocket World Championships in 1978 and 1980.

SF AGE: Let's discuss the recent DC-X experiments.

LANDIS: DC-X is a test version of a spaceship intended—when the final one is built—to go from the surface to orbit without dropping any parts off on the way.

DYSON: The first test flight of the DC-X was on August 18th. It flew to 150 feet and translated 350 feet.

ANDREWS: Marianne and I were among the pleased

few and fortunate hundreds who witnessed the second flight of the DC-X at White Sands on September 11, 1993. We watched in awe as the first real rocket ship took off and landed (ahem) the way God and Robert Heinlein intended—vertically. This was a truly historic flight, after all—the first time a rocket had flown the second time.

LANDIS: Not quite. The hydrogen peroxide-powered Bell "Rocket Belt" beat it by 30 years, and in the '60s Bell developed rocket chairs and even rocket powered pogo sticks for the Army. But DC-X is still a magnificent rocket.

DYSON: The whole flight only lasted 66 seconds, but it was a moment in time I will always cherish. Watching it hover, I wondered if the Air Force had discovered the secret to teleportation.

ANDREWS: The Delta Clipper-Experimental is a one-third mockup/prototype of a truly revolutionary orbiter—the precursor to a Single-Stage To Orbit (SSTO) craft.

LANDIS: When Goddard, Oberth, and Tsiolkovski first analyzed the rocket problem in the early 1900's, they realized that with existing materials it would be impossible to make a single-stage rocket achieve orbit. They were right—for the materials technology of their day.

DYSON: Even with today's light-weight materials, getting single stage to orbit will be difficult, but well worth the effort. The video that McDonnell Douglas put out used a good analogy. Think what it would cost if we had to build a new jet after each flight. I did some calculations. For a Boeing 747 that seats 400, each ticket would cost \$375,000.

ANDREWS: Until recently, the materials, engines, and design principles that make possible an SSTO did not exist. But because of R&D in those areas, it is now possible, feasible, and practical to build such craft. Even NASA—in its forthcoming "Access To Space" document—admits as much.

LANDIS: The key concept is to use lightweight structural materials only recently being developed: graphite epoxy for liquid hydrogen fuel tanks, aluminum lithium for liquid oxygen tanks, and new insulation materials.

DYSON: The DC-X aeroshell, for example, was built using composites developed by Burt Rutan, the guy who flew around the world. But the DC-X would never make it to orbit; it is much too heavy.

LANDIS: To reach orbit without dropping a stage, using hydrogen-oxygen fuel, requires that 90 percent of the launch mass be fuel.

ANDREWS: The DC-X was intended to show that, for the first time, an actual rocketship could take off and land under its own power—but also, one that could be re-used without having to be rebuilt.

DYSON: It also hovered and flew sideways (nose up)!

ANDREWS: But we must not forget, the DC-X was also built in record time—18 months—and under budget, by the use of new management tools as well. New materials alone will not suffice. When the paradigm shifts, everything must change, or the slowest link will hold back the rest.

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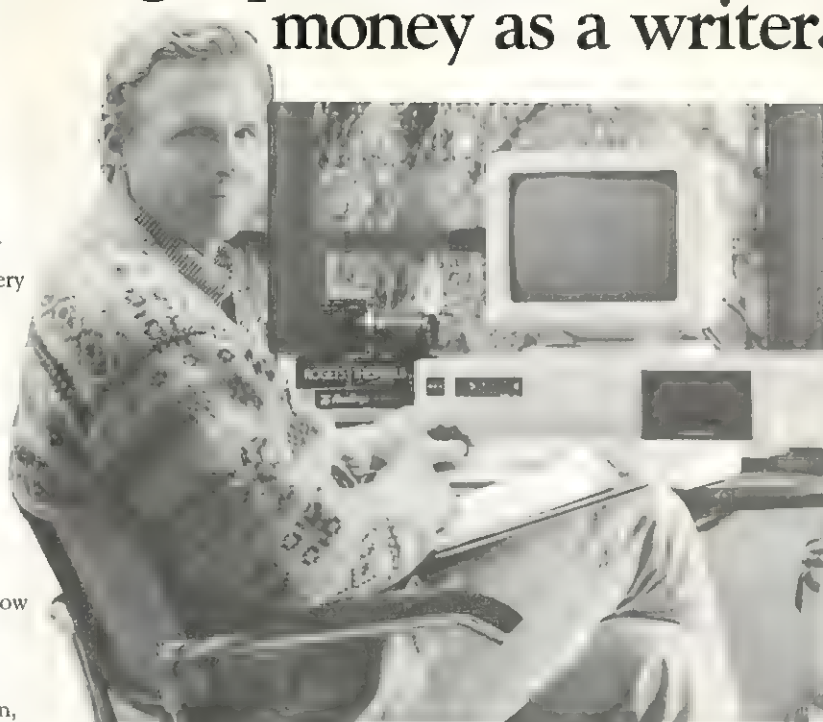
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DYSON: Arlan's made a good point, the main thing DC-X demonstrated was that the "build a little, test a little" philosophy works.

LANDIS: Exactly.

ANDREWS: When I was discussing this point with a group of aerospace people just three evenings ago over dinner, a shuttle astronaut present said sarcastically, "And they proved you could defy gravity!" I remarked, "And that you could build an entirely new craft for the cost of two shuttle toilets!" The reply was, "Ouch!"

LANDIS: Another very important thing that the DC-X experiment demonstrated was that a very small team was sufficient for the ground crew.

DYSON: Mission Control was a 40-foot trailer with a team of three people.

LANDIS: Rather than the "standing army" required by conventional space launchers.

DYSON: The DC-X also demonstrated that machine-generated software works. It was the first major vehicle to use that kind of code. Software is usually the long pole in the schedule tent.

ANDREWS: Overall, the philosophy of the DC-X program was that rockets should be designed to be treated like aircraft are—landed, cleaned up, refueled, and used over and over again. The entire program began in the early '80s with Air Force precursors, contracted to look at ways of achieving SSTO. The McDonnell Douglas team finally won the contract to build a demonstrator for a vertical takeoff and landing.

LANDIS: The current DC-X project traces

its history back to a classified project called "Science Dawn," which started in 1983. This was a joint project of Boeing, McDonnell Douglas, and Lockheed for the Air Force.

ANDREWS: Credit goes to the so-called "Star Wars" organization, then called SDIO (Strategic Defense Initiative Organization), which funded the whole thing. They needed cheap access to orbit, and they could not afford the monstrous costs of military launchers or the shuttle. After the successful flight of the DC-X, the project was transferred to ARPA (Advanced Research Projects Organization), which has now killed it, possibly.

LANDIS: The SDI Organization was instructed, after the loss of the Russian military threat, to stop looking at orbital missile defenses, and instead to focus on ground-based defense. This eliminated the whole rationale they used to fund the program.

ANDREWS: But because of the DC-X and the public outcry (and inside-NASA outcry as well), NASA and the government have reviewed available technologies and discovered—as people have been telling them for 10 years—that SSTO is possible.

DYSON: Informed sources say the program will likely be taken over by the Air Force. NASA is looking at doing an X (experimental) program SSTO, called X-2000. I spoke with Dan Goldin about it briefly in October, and he said there will be X programs at NASA, but he didn't have any money.

LANDIS: DC-X has captured the public's imagination because it isn't a paper study—it's a real, flying rocket.

ANDREWS: Right, Geoff—the DC-X weighed approximately the same amount as the paper studies done for other proposals. These people bet the farm and won. And so, of course, they have to be stopped.

LANDIS: Unfortunately, they haven't won yet! DC-X is a small-scale demo. What we need is the real thing.

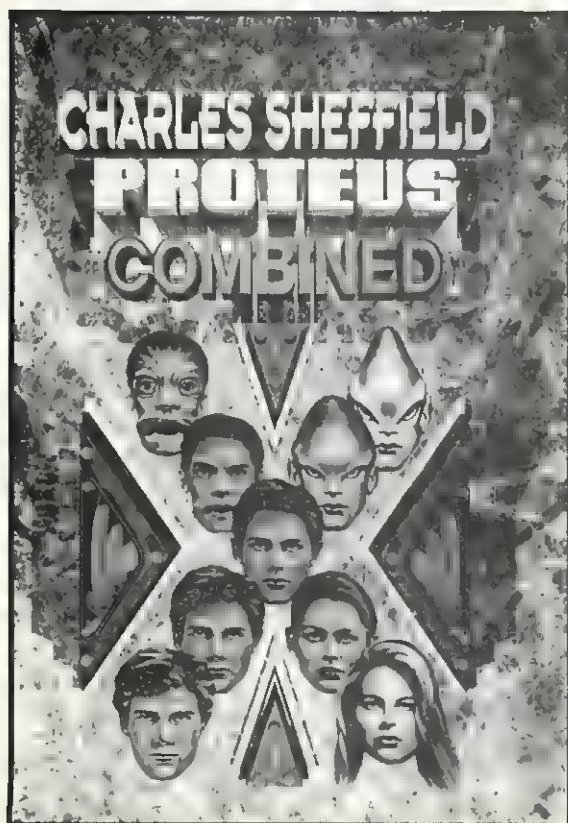
ANDREWS: Two weeks ago I was briefed by NASA people on their version of SSTO. They used the same viewgraphs that General Graham (father of the DC-X) has used, and the same lingo. At lunch, they even expressed the same sentiments. Problem was, they look at the year 2008 as the operational date. A DCY/DC-1 could be flying way before then.

DYSON: The DC-X completed only three test flights, August 18th, September 11th, and Sept 30th. There was an engine shutdown in October, and then the funding dried up. We have a perfectly good test rocket being mothballed!

SF AGE: Why would anyone *not* prefer the DC-X method? The standard way seems so wasteful.

LANDIS: Many reasons. Some people are skeptical about whether the technique will really be able to do what its proponents claim. Several key points have yet to be demonstrated. Other people think that alternative approaches would work better.

ANDREWS: Bureaucrats of the old school have no vision of cheap space travel for the average citizen, and thus oppose us. Those of us who wish to see the human race



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go into space—maybe even ourselves—have a different set of values.

DYSON: The mass fraction of DC-X was only about .5, and we need .90 to make it to orbit. Some say it is just too risky, that to get peak performance and light weight, we will end up with no payload capacity. But the main cost of these kinds of programs has been the army on the ground, which DC-X showed isn't necessary.

LANDIS: The problem is that with current uses for space, there *isn't* the kind of launch rate needed to justify developing a new vehicle. And then, without a new—cheaper—vehicle, there isn't the financial incentive to develop profitable new things to do in space.

DYSON: Jerry Pournelle rightfully points out that when we broke the sound barrier, we were not worried about payload. Our payload was the pilot. DC-X should be seen as an experimental rocket program that potentially will become a commercial venture, like KC-135, which became the Boeing 707.

ANDREWS: An interesting article appeared in *Scientific American* in 1990, stating that only 15 satellite launches per year would ever be needed. Reminds me of the prediction by IBM marketing in the 1950s that 10 computers would service the whole world market.

LANDIS: When somebody—at NASA, say—proposes a new vehicle, Congress asks the question: what *funded* program is there that this will be used for?

ANDREWS: Actually, they will also ask themselves and their staffers—is this going to bring work to my district?

LANDIS: And then, they ask, can you prove that developing a new vehicle is cheaper than just using the same old vehicles a few more times?

DYSON: They need to read G. Harry Stine's article in *Analog* about potential markets.

LANDIS: Congress doesn't care about potential markets. If a technology doesn't meet an immediate need for a funded program, it gets orphaned.

DYSON: One of the things we should note about SSTOs is that they can be launched from any district. They do not drop stages and so don't have to be launched over water, like the Titans and shuttles.

ANDREWS: When I directly asked a staffer last year why he wouldn't support any SSTO, he said because his state wouldn't get any jobs out of it. When I asked if he ever did things for the national interest, he literally laughed at my naiveté.

DYSON: I told my Texas representatives to think about using those closed military bases for spaceports. I told them we could build the parts for SSTOs here.

ANDREWS: Another reason the staffer offered was that "You can't launch rockets inland and overland." I asked him what the Russians had been doing for half this century.

DYSON: We are thinking about SSTOs for orbit, but they can also be used for point-to-

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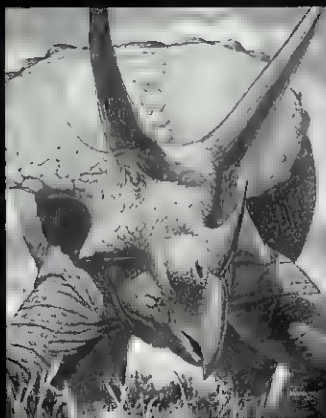
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LANDIS: Quite true. 45 minutes from anywhere to anywhere!

ANDREWS: What DC-X means, historically, is that the concepts of off-the-shelf technology, rapid prototyping, concurrent engineering and X-vehicle experiments can bring down the cost of rocket flight orders of magnitude.

DYSON: They can land on any spot of flat ground, too—no need for long, fancy runways. I think this is the reason, the point-to-point transfer, that the Air Force can sell this concept. The military needs this capability in the volatile world we live in today.

ANDREWS: I think, at this juncture, that the SSTO concept—kicked in the butt by the DC-X team—is going to survive. I doubt that the DC-X itself will, unfortunately, because “you can tell the pioneers by the arrows in their backs.”

LANDIS: Last year Congress directed ARPA to spend 40 million dollars to build a successor to DC-X. This still wouldn't be a single stage to orbit vehicle, but would get closer, and demonstrate many of the remaining technologies. Such as approaching the 90 percent fuel, 10 percent structure and engines goal that is required.

ANDREWS: My state of New Mexico has invested heavily, politically, in the SSTO concept, because we have a launch and instrumentation infrastructure at White Sands Missile Range unlike any in the world. We want to see White Sands Spaceport operating down there, in a test range that is the size of Israel.

LANDIS: Development costs of the actual booster which would get to orbit is estimated to be about \$2 billion. Which is cheap!

DYSON: Geoff is right, and unfortunately, so is Arlan. Spacecause will be fighting for SSTO funding to be put in the budget request for this year. We do have some friends in Congress, and I think the battle is far from lost.

ANDREWS: Marianne, I keep on fighting for the DC-X, but one of Andrews' Laws of Politics is “Nothing stays fixed.”

DYSON: I know, Arlan, that's why I'm working as a press secretary for a congressional campaign.

ANDREWS: Outside of cheap access to space, there are engineering justifications for reusable rockets. One of my predictions is that *only* reusable rockets can improve upon reliability and efficiency. If you throw something away, it's hard to evaluate it.

DYSON: One of the big problems we have

now is that there is no real leadership on space within the administration. The National Space Council was disbanded last spring by the Clinton Administration.

ANDREWS: Marianne, the Space Council didn't provide such leadership.

DYSON: Well, I would disagree, at least in part. We had a focus and someone who was in charge of policy. Now we have no policy or long-range goals for our space program.

ANDREWS: I went to some of their meetings, and as I reported in my *Analog* article last June, “Single Stage To Infinity!”, the usual old suspects gave the same old tired responses—they needed billions and billions for decades and decades, to do not much. While we're talking space development, my prediction is also that there will be no space station, not as presently planned. The plans call for 20 plus successful shuttle

launches, plus a lot of Russian launches. That is not going to happen. The Russians might not even have permission from Kazakhstan to launch in a couple of years.

LANDIS: For decades we've used the same old ICBM-based launchers to get into space. The last time a totally new space launcher was developed was in 1975—the shuttle. The shuttle design is almost 20 years old now.

ANDREWS: Geoff is right. The ICBM designs are from the '50s and '60s and they are old in concept, and worse, they are old in business practices.

LANDIS: The shuttle was a groundbreaking design at the time, but it's old. It demonstrated that you can send something into orbit and get it back and fly it again, but it never should have been considered the end of the development of spacecraft. We can do better now. We *will* do better now.

ANDREWS: The next time you get a tour of a space station mockup, be prepared for a shock. The computers to be used in the space station—which will not be operational this millennium—are *386 based!* There is no plan for modularity, so that while we're all using three-dimensional, virtual reality systems based on 986's here at home, in 2002 they'll be pumping out 386 processing! And they are not ashamed of it. The ultimate answer is, get government out of the picture. Let the government develop X-vehicles, and then let industry—with government priming, if required—build commercial rockets that can take us up for under \$50 per pound. The shuttle has no reason for being anymore, outside of the station, and the station will never be built. Until you do not have 9000 people working on one rocket flight (as with

Continued on page 36

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ITEND TO THINK IN ANALOGIES, AND AT TIMES THIS leads to interesting bypaths. On occasion an effort to understand the basis of some incidental observation leads to appreciation of a muted universal principle. Here are some examples.

Tit for Tat: This phrase is often used, but perhaps not perfectly understood. I had a dialogue once with my wife as we were stripping for the night, and she poked me in the chest, so I poked her in the bosom, saying "Tit for Tat!" "So that's what it's called," she retorted, trumping me. Actually it's just a contraction of "This for that," though her explanation has its appeal. The idea is that you respond to someone the way he has treated you. I think it's known as the Silver Rule, less commendable than the Golden Rule, wherein you treat others as you would like them to treat you, but still effective.

When computer programs contested with each other for points, trying different strategies, the winner was one called Tit for Tat, which started off treating others well, but thereafter did back to others whatever they did to it. The logic is apparent: if you treat everyone well regardless, some will take advantage of your generosity and wipe you out. If, for example, you go around kissing everyone, and someone responds with a punch in the kisser, you would be a fool to keep on kissing; a return punch seems justified and a lot more satisfying. So the T/T strategy of survival is relevant for life as well as for computer games.

However, it isn't perfect. It tends to lead to vendettas

that merely grind both parties down. So a modified strategy came to prevail in the computer games, wherein on occasion a tat was forgiven: the other cheek was turned, as it were, and another kiss bestowed despite the punch received. Though this might be less satisfying, it does break up the vendetta syndrome, and is in accordance with the biblical admonishment to "turn the other cheek." But it works best if not overdone, which is perhaps another lesson in realism. It seems to apply across the board, to every aspect of life and business. "If my friend cheats me once, shame on him; if he cheats me twice, shame on me." If a business rips off a customer, some customers will seek vengeance, and businesses that make a habit of bad dealings will in time lose out. But sometimes it is better just to let it go, a time or two, rather than get into a fight.

I have seen this extend even to nature: we have two young hickory trees by our house, one on each side. One summer, tent caterpillars came and ate off all the leaves of both of them. This annoyed me, but I couldn't reach high enough to get those caterpillars out. In due course the trees grew their leaves back, but it must have been quite a setback. They had lost substance and time, and perhaps their growth was stunted. Next summer the caterpillars came again and denuded the trees, aggravating me similarly. But the third summer, the caterpillars came, set up their tents—and stopped. Only a few leaves were eaten, and the nests did not expand. What had happened? Well, it has been discovered that trees are not as helpless as they look. They will forgive one denuding, but if it happens again they take action, and the third set of leaves contained poison to kill the caterpillars, thus demonstrating a modified version of Tit for Tat, with the penalty for repeated violation being death. Nature knew it long before we did.

The Template: Now that I am in the Computer Age, which may be an aspect of the Science Fiction Age, I use a word processor. I am satisfied with it because, having struggled with several, I finally found the one that best suits my needs. Then I read a review of it in a computer magazine—and it received an indifferent rating. That annoyed me: why should some relatively clumsy program receive a high rating, while mine received a lower one? My annoyance was readily triggered, because the phenomenon was similar to what I encounter in book reviewing: my excellent novels get rated lower than Joe Schmo's hack work. (Joe Schmo might have another opinion, of course, but he's not writing this piece. Perhaps he'll be here next issue.) So I got serious about it: I analyzed the two programs and the review—and discovered *The Template*.

I found that there is a particular word processing program that the reviewer is evidently familiar with, so he uses that as the standard by which to judge others. This might seem reasonable, but it's not, because it's unfair. His program has some strong features, so naturally mine suffered, not being as strong in those respects. My pro-

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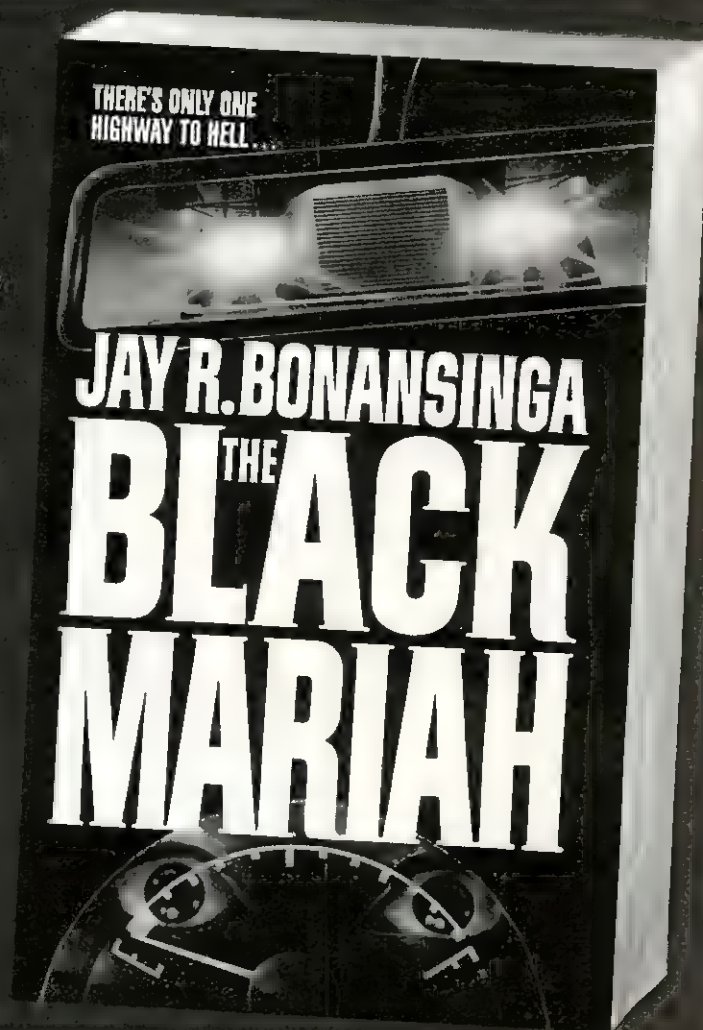
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gram has some strong features—which weren't rated, because they aren't in the template program. Thus it was inevitable that my program would receive a lower overall rating. One program can't compete with the template for another. Does this seem like sour grapes?

Consider trying to judge a woman by using the template for a man. She would be found inferior in height and muscle, and those particular qualities that make her female would not be rated, because the man lacks them. Thus she would be deemed inferior overall. This may indeed be the way women are judged in some societies, but is it fair, or is it sexism?

Consider English grammar: someone, way back when, decided that since English derives in part from Latin, it must answer to the rules for Latin syntax. Thus the attempt to form it into declensions, cases, moods, and so on. However, English is not Latin; it has virtues of its own, such as being a living language, which are not rated by English teachers. Thus students in school must struggle through years of irrelevant grammatical studies, because of the inappropriate template. Consider teenagers: they may be physically and mentally mature at age 14, but the Society Template says maturity comes only at age 18 or 21. They are thus not supposed to act like adults: no voting, no smoking, no sex, and not much freedom. Is this realistic? And of course the problem with reviewing books and movies based on a template established by those whose tastes don't match those of the majority of readers or viewers explains why the most popular entries get critically panned. This happens all the time, but is it appropriate?

It happens in academia too. On my shelf I have a comprehensive 2,000-page anthology of British literature used in colleges. There are two major figures of 17th-century British literature: John Milton, author of *Paradise Lost*; and John Bunyan, author of *Pilgrim's Progress*. But only Milton is represented in this text; Bunyan is not mentioned at all. Why not? Evidently because he didn't fit the anthologist's template. The distinction between this and outright censorship becomes hard to see. Indeed, the censors have templates they would like to make everyone else fit, on pain of imprisonment. I see much mischief in our society being caused by inappropriate templates.

The Ten Dollar Deal: This is a minor thought experiment that captured my mind, as have things like the Prisoner's Dilemma and general game theory in the past. Here it is: A generous man offers you \$10, provided you make a deal to share it with someone else. No other strings. Do you do it? Sure; it's

easy money. Go make the deal with your best friend down the street: does he want \$5, no strings attached? Of course he does. So what's the significance? It is that in real life, things aren't so pretty. Soon folks catch

on that the original deal doesn't specify even shares, so Person A may offer Person B only \$3, or \$2, or \$1, and keep the rest himself. Say you're Person B: would you take \$1, rather than nothing, even if you know Person A is getting \$9? How about 50 cents? Suppose you're hungry, and 50 cents will buy you a donut, and Person A says, take it or leave it; do you go hungry as a matter of principle? If you don't take it, someone else will. Thus the deal becomes a test in bargaining. Just how far can Person B be squeezed? Does this seem academic?

Consider how the president of a corporation may make a hundred times as much as the lowest paid worker in it: this is that deal in real life. But if the B people get together, agreeing that none of them will accept less than, say, \$2, then maybe the balance shifts, because Person A must make a deal somewhere or lose his share. Thus we get unions. In fact our whole free enterprise society reflects just such bargaining, with some getting rich and some getting poor. That simple deal becomes a matter of survival. Anyone interested in writing for a living comes up against it in a hurry: the Publisher is Person A, the Writer is Person B. Is it any wonder that publishers have affluent New York buildings, while most writers can't earn a living from their writing? This isn't discrimination, just the Deal in action.

The 90 Percent Factor: You know how negative characters like me keep harping at the faults in our society. The obvious question is, why don't we turn positive and focus on the great majority of good things? This is where being too positive becomes dangerous. The key question is, would you drive a car with brakes that work only 90 percent of the time? Don't even think about that other 10 percent; after all, that is greatly outweighed by all the good time. Yet most folk would not drive such a car—because they know that the other 10 percent is liable to kill them. Would you eat an apple from a barrel where 90 percent of them are good and only 10 percent are poisonous? Would you marry a spouse who is homicidal only 10 percent of the time? Positive thinking can be suicidal, if not done realistically, and sometimes even the most favorable odds don't seem all that attractive, on reflection.

I see these little analogies all around me, in computers, business, nature, and society. Are they important? Perhaps not. Yet I wonder. □

MOVIES

Continued from page 23

much to make a movie happen but never get credit. The crafts services person, for example, who makes sure that cold soft drinks and coffee are there when needed. And the first assistant director, who serves as a sort of sergeant, making sure that things get done.

Ellis stressed how important that job is. "The first assistant directors set the pace during the shooting. They need to control everybody and not let people know they're controlling them. It's not about directing; it's about organization."

The hyphenated "producer-director" may sound impressive, but Ellis laughs at the stereotypes. People think that the work involves "posing and saying 'action,' then somebody's rolling the camera and somebody's putting the thing out there"—he makes the motion of a clapperboard with his hands—"and the actors say their lines and you paste it all together and people start wheelbarrowing money up to your front door. It's really not like that."

With *Twilight*, the process began with a script written by Tim Sullivan (who also stars) for a "science fiction allegory and post-apocalypse adventure" with references to AIDS and cult religions. Ellis then worked out the logistics and shooting schedule and started raising funds.

The comparison Ellis makes is to a train. "Once the camera starts rolling on the first day, you're on a locomotive that's going someplace and you don't know where it's going to end up. Every day you're spending money. Inexorably, it's moving forward and after a certain point there's nothing you can do to stop it. You hope that the money's there and that the people are committed enough to you that they'll stay even if the money runs out.

"You have to shoot, and you have to shoot as fast as possible. You're spending money; you've got people with diverse points of view, weather, other variables. If you can plan everything down to the last little detail, that's great, but it's not always possible on low-budget science fiction. Obviously you have to have planned makeup, costumes, sets, etc., but there are certain things you just can't plan for, that you don't have the time and money to plan for."

Certain things like bugs.

One of the buildings they filmed *Twilight* in turned out to be infested with mosquitoes and it almost crippled the production. "I've still got some scars on my legs," Ellis said, "and so do others from the cast and crew. Swarms and swarms of mosquitoes would get into the building. Those bugs nearly drove us mad! You'd have tons of jungle juice on you and they were landing all over you. It was hideous."

That phase of production is over. By Jan-



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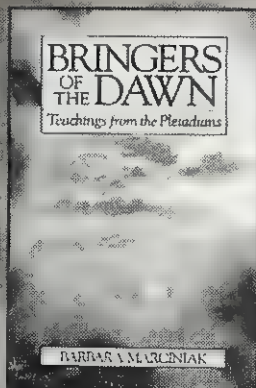
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uary, almost all of the photography had been done. Ellis was editing the film at his place in an upscale apartment complex behind a majestically frozen fountain. He lives with a minimal amount of furniture in rooms that are dominated by professional equipment. One corner of the living room is filled with stacks of videocassettes and promotional material. VCRs and a laser disc player sit directly on the wall-to-wall carpet.

A wide editing table is set up in his den. Within easy reach behind it are an Apple computer and fax machine. They're flanked by racks holding strips of film ready to be edited. On his left is a set of industrial metal shelves holding heavy reels of 16mm film and tape. That's where he's putting the film together, frame by frame, shot by shot.

Maybe this isn't as bad as the mosquitoes, but it's just as tough. It's the real work, and after more than a year on the material, Ellis is so close to the story that he has no idea how good or bad it is. First he has to put together a rough cut about two hours long. That will be trimmed down to 100 minutes, and, he added, the special effects still have to be done.

"For the first time, we'll be using computer technology for special effects from Silicon Graphics. We also have big spiders in the film. From leg tip to leg tip when they're standing, they're about 5 feet wide and 4 feet tall; black widows that are nasty. They're stop-motion animation by Kent Burton who did Big Harvey."

Despite the rocky road that *Twilight* has traveled so far, Ellis is optimistic about its future, certainly on home video and perhaps even in theaters. "I'm hoping that we can get an art house situation at least, and maybe a regional release on it. We shot in a wide screen format so it could go into theaters. If it's anything like I imagine it to be, I think it would have the potential for that. It's such an odd bird."

"First and foremost, I wanted to make a good science fiction film, a film that people who read science fiction and people who watch science fiction on television and movies would look at and say, 'This film has ideas. It has a different feel, a different psychology behind it.' I like the mixture of the unknown and the nature of the universe and the nature of life and the eternal questions, why are we here, how are we here."

"The best science fiction—and there isn't much—challenges you and makes you think. When it's done well, you go to a totally different place, sometimes a different time, and it's not boring. When it's done well."

And that's the catch—doing it well. Right now, *Twilight* is so rough and unfinished that it's impossible to say if it's done well. In its finished form, it could be spun gold; it could be something less. But then, that's the risk that every filmmaker from Stephen Spielberg to John Ellis runs with every movie.

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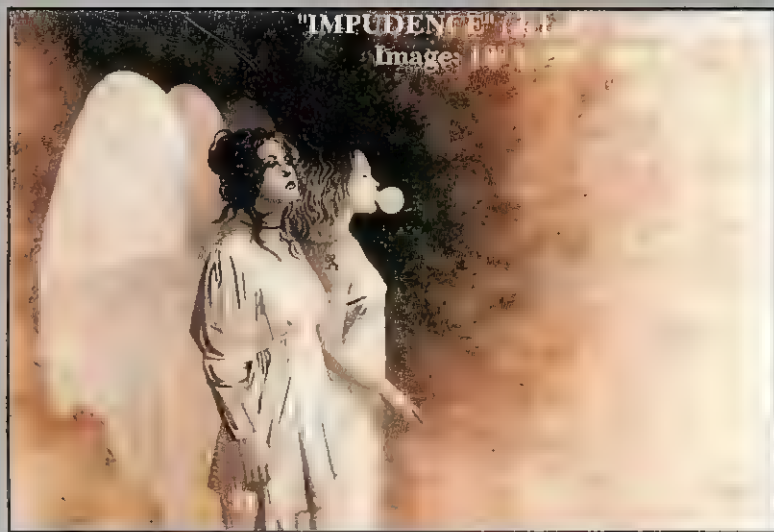
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SCIENCE

Continued from page 28

the shuttle), the cost won't ever come down.

DYSON: I am very frustrated when I think that with the DC-X, X2 and Y programs, we could have the technology ready for industry to take over in about six years. These delays are making my trip to orbit seem less and less likely.

ANDREWS: All other surviving industries in the world have learned the hard way that you must design, build and test smart, efficiently, and concurrently. Otherwise, you die.

LANDIS: Another point is to make sure that you don't oversell concepts like DC-X. Get the right numbers, and be truthful. People in office—and people outside of office—don't appreciate being lied to.

DYSON: The space community is finally waking up to the necessity of political action.

ANDREWS: In actuality, some at NASA, to give them credit, are on board with the SSTO concept and are pushing it. Only problem is, they are thinking of the next millennium, and we want it sooner.

DYSON: Arlan, are you worried that if the government, be it NASA or the Air Force, continues to play around with research on SSTO, they will kill off private efforts completely?

ANDREWS: Marianne, yes, I am. As I predicted in an earlier article, we may very well see the end of crewed (or should I say

"crude"?) spaceflight. The robots-are-better crowd may win, or we may stop all spaceflight altogether. They want to keep that money down here on earth!

LANDIS: NASA operates under a lot of constraints. A lot of things get proposed, and then Congress says no. I think the SSTO proponents are just beginning to learn this.

DYSON: Some folks have told me that if the government would get out completely, the aerospace companies might do it.

LANDIS: The market just isn't big enough for private companies to develop it. Yet.

ANDREWS: Geoff, NASA, to date, is not the agency to do the SSTO. Once new ideas can again be developed there, by people who care about space—like the place once was—it may be different.

DYSON: But I don't see the government getting out in reality. So, I'm pushing for government to hurry it up! Our aerospace industry is dying. Here in Houston, we have laid off thousands of engineers in the last three months, and California is even worse. These people could be put to meaningful work

The shuttle was a groundbreaking design at the time, but it's old. It never should have been considered the end of the development of spacecraft. We can do better now.

building SSTO, and we could capture the world launch market, which we are losing to foreign competition. The Clinton administration is sensitive to this issue—regaining our high technology edge. We need to get them to understand how SSTO fits in with their plans. The appeal of SSTO is that it offers access to space to the public, not just a chosen few. And when it comes right down to it, that is why it is worth fighting for. All this talk about mass fraction and engines is neat, but not what will sell it. As Air

Force Col. Peter Worden said on September 11, "One of the key reasons for doing this is that it is the best chance that you and I are going to have of going to space."

LANDIS: Talk about mass ratios may seem boring, but if a SSTO vehicle doesn't make the engine and structural mass less than 0.1 percent of the fueled vehicle mass, it won't make it to orbit. Period. No matter how good it looks taking off and landing. That's the make or break for SSTO, and there comes a time to stop talking and just do it. That time is now. □

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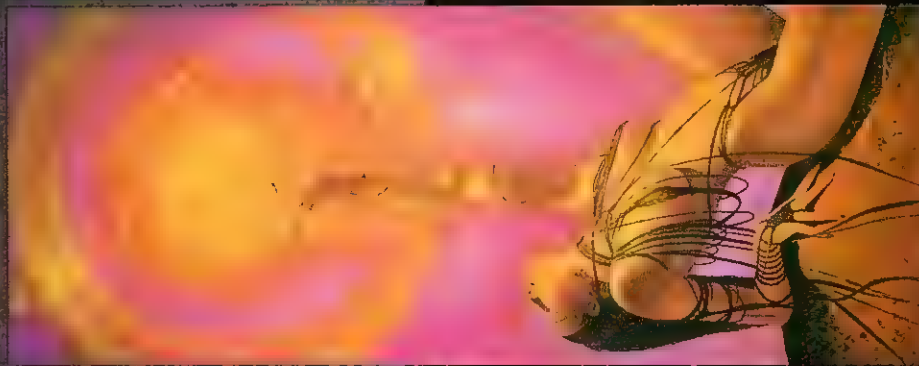
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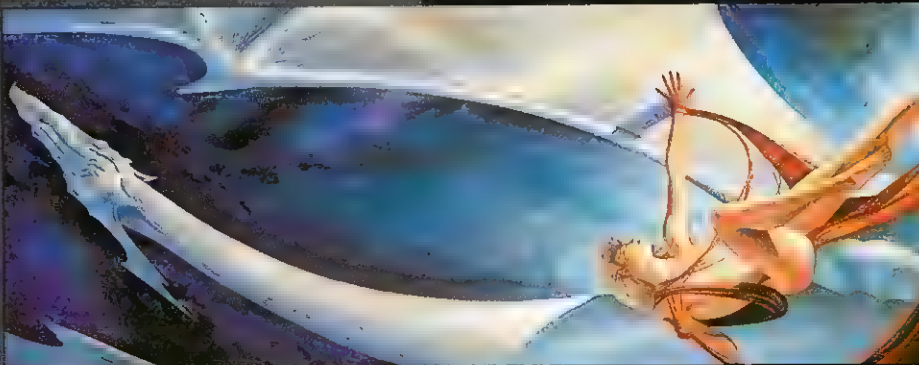
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Seth Tate would do anything to save the mysterious woman named Rayla, little realizing the price might very well be planet Earth itself.

WHERE TWO SOULS DWELL

BY AL SARRANTONIO

Illustration by Mark Maxwell

THE FIRST THING I REMEMBER about her was her dark ringlets. A series of circles: black rings of hair, the dark moony circles of her eyes, a puckered O of a mouth that seemed to smile without losing its shape. And rings on her fingers: red rubies, a topaz as big as a wrestler's knuckle, a moonstone set in a silver perch a half-inch wide, and, nestled like a beautiful young bird, a blue-black sapphire that didn't seem to have any setting at all, but which I later, on much closer examination, discovered was pinched to a wispy fragment of gold that encircled one thumb.

And her dog, of course: another mass of rings and curls, with eyes nearly as big and soft as the girl's own. The two of them would have made an easy portrait for one of those caricaturists who round off every corner and come up with a striking likeness in a few deft, curving strokes.

I wish I had had just such an artist with me the day I first met her, to preserve that first impression. It would have been a sentimental reminder of a time almost too far gone to remember, when things were different for both of us.

That day I speak of, and that moment, encapsulated my first trip aboard *Shuttle Abraxas*, for what should have been my first long stay on Space Station Oogie (or, if you prefer, NASAT-2A Experimental Orbital Enclosure). You can see why it was nicknamed Oogie, though the tangible reason was as a memorial for a chimp that had been the first to die on board. Oogie was a biological station specializing in tests on animals—occasionally humans—for various space-related matters such as extended space environmental effects, and the effect of space environment on new medical techniques.

I could have told you everything about that station before I ever set foot on it, because, except for reading Goethe, I'd done nothing but eat, sleep and dream the damn thing during the year it took to get me aboard. My line was what I liked to call applied academics—which is just my way of admitting that yes, I am an academic but no, I don't sit grading undergraduate test papers and trying to publish hash work in the journals to get tenure. Though I did have a university post in Chicago, I hadn't taught a total of two semesters in the five years I'd been on staff.

I'd done an expert job of avoiding all the pitfalls of regurgitation in front of a class by convincing the head of the biology department that he had a real hotshot in the making and that I should just be left alone with my work until the cocoon burst open and he had his butterfly. I wasn't being deceptive about it—I really was working on rewarding material. I had been encouraged, even ordered, to keep working on it, even though most of my colleagues were now concentrating their attention on the horrible blight which had been affecting crops first in Asia, then Europe and now North America to the point where mass famine was possible. I felt guilt over my abstention; also, my cocoon was starting to get hard around the edges and it was late in the spring season for my soon-to-be-untrusting mentor. So I decided to add a corollary to that hateful academic commandment "publish or perish," and began to pursue what had been a long-term goal, seeking to make it a short-term reality. "Publish, orbit or perish" became my motto, and I was able to hold off the lepidopterist while I tried to get my work onto Oogie.

And, a bit to my surprise, within a year I was in. Apparently my work outside the stuffy journals was noticed—and a little string yanking at NASA where my father just happened to be a project coordinator didn't hurt either. I preferred to think the first had more to do with my getting aboard, while I knew in my heart that the second had done the trick. At the time, I didn't know how much of a trick my father had pulled.

But I was out of Chicago and on my way to Oogie, that was the important thing, and my work, having to do with molecular stress and biological tissue breakdown under zero-G, began to gather itself into tangible little experimental piles to be dealt with in space.

I went up in *Abraxas* on a dry hot day from Edwards Air Force Base. Normally, only military shuttles go out of Edwards, but I was told they were handling a backlog of flights since one of the main pads at Cape Canaveral was shut down. Later, I found out the real reason. I remember meeting the two-man crew on going in; a crisp blond man named Anderson, and his copilot, a brunette with a warm smile named Gerry. She was the first woman I had ever seen in a shuttle suit, and I have to say that with all that it hid of her, it made the little I could see more noticeable. There were three other passengers on board: two other biomedical types named Leafler and Henderson, who I knew I would have to spend some time with later (in Leafler's case that didn't look to be much of a chore; he had a quick wit and didn't take himself seriously the way Henderson did), and a third who was late and was hustled into the auxiliary couch in the back so that none of us saw who it was.

Surprisingly, the takeoff was just like in the movies I'd seen as a kid: a big palm pushing me down into my seat and a little pressure around the eyeballs; then a bit of a stomach flip when the giant bird arched over in early flight to shoot at its orbit window. It was like being on a not-unpleasant upside down roller coaster, and from the quick glances I stole at my two companions I saw just about what I had expected: Leafler was enjoying the ride and Henderson had a sallow, pinched look on his face as though it was time for an enema.

An hour later we were slotted safely in orbit and crawling our way toward Oogie; another 20 minutes and the same kind of bump you feel when your car butts up against a curb announced that we had arrived.

I had an on-board case with me which I spilled when I got up, so I was the last to leave. When I got to the exit I nearly ran right over our mysterious passenger and her little dog.

I've already described the initial impact she had on me. After giving me one of those embarrassed smiles that still preserved the roundness of her mouth, she moved to get off and I managed to stutter out something.

"I'm Seth Tate. You must be our late arrival?"

She stopped and turned to me, and so did her dog, and I got the eeriest sensation. They both had the same look on their faces. If you've ever seen the comic strip "Blondie," you've noticed that the dog in the family always mirrors Dagwood's expressions. That was the same notion I got here. This girl was giving me a look of calm, shy assessment, and here was this dog of hers giving me the same

softly calculating gaze. Finally, after a moment that seemed much longer, she said, "Why yes, I am, Mr. Tate. My name is Rayla."

She held out her slim hand, the one with the delicate thumb ring on it, and I took it in my own. It felt almost too slim and soft to be a human hand. I had the odd idea I was taking the delicate paw of a purebred dog in my palm. I looked into Rayla's face; for a moment her eyes, a beautifully speckled hazel, went blank and then her being, it seemed to me, climbed up the well behind them and filled them with life. They were almost the eyes of a child—pure, open unmocking, and innocent—and I felt I could fall into them and lose myself forever. Immediately, I wanted to.

But the shyness suddenly returned. She looked down quickly, and my eyes followed hers to the dog, which I could have sworn had the same expression on its face of caught innocence. Then abruptly she dipped away from me out of the air lock and was gone, the dog melting away with her, leaving behind the softest-spoken word I have ever heard from a human being, "Good-bye."

I woke from my momentary enchantment after she left, feeling very foolish and alone. Hurriedly, I gathered my things together and left *Abraxas*.

RAYLA WAS STILL IN MY THOUGHTS, BUT I VERY SOON LOST myself in new details: the assignment of a cabin in the surprisingly roomy Oogie; a short lecture on procedures which, I noticed, Rayla did not attend; a quick tour of the station, except, curiously, one wing, which again produced no Rayla. I was chagrined to find myself bunked with Henderson, who wasted no time in proving he was just as dull and tight-lipped as I thought he would be. I was relieved to find that our schedules were such that we would rarely be occupying the sleep cubicle at the same time. There was a reason for that, too, I later found out.

My work on Oogie commenced. I was quickly absorbed into the scenario I had rehearsed for the past year. Most of my days were spent feeding various chemicals to patches of muscle tissue; most of my nights were spent looking at the stars or down at the sickly Earth, whose beautiful blue oceans now surrounded patches of dusty brown where croplands should have been. Eastern Asia was a wasteland, with the blight's fingers stretching their hold tightly across to Europe. Looking down at the United States, I was startled to see the once fertile plains west of Chicago now spotted with dry rot.

When I could take these scenes no longer I wrote letters, read Goethe—and thought about Rayla.

I had not seen her since that first day, and for all I knew she might well have been a ghost. Discreetly at first, and then more boldly, I began to explore every corner of Oogie, acting the idiot tourist when necessary. But I found no girl, no dog. I discovered that most of the rest of the inhabitants, nine in number, didn't know, or wouldn't admit, that she existed. It did seem, though, that there was one arm of the "H" shape in which Oogie was arranged that was reserved strictly for military use. Off-limits, and no getting around it. Not even a true-blue tourist could get a peek, and the most I could get out of the fellow with the icy stare and tight smile who always happened to be hanging around the air lock that led to it was that they were doing something "mighty strange" in that area.

But Rayla proved to be no ghost. She reappeared one night, like a wisp of cloud in a cloudless sky, while I stood staring reflectively down through one of the under-ports at Earth swimming past. Reflectively and a little drunkenly, since I'd indulged in a little poker game and mild drinking contest with Anderson and Gerry, the two *Abraxas* pilots, who softened me up with a story about how they were leaving the next day with all of the test animals on board the shuttle, and how smelly and irritating the trip down would be, and that they wouldn't be able to play cards with me again until they came back up in a month with another load of smelly animals. Gerry looked even better out of her shuttle suit than in it, but that didn't stop her or her partner from fleecing me, and giving me a mild bourbon headache to boot.

For perhaps the 50th time since my trip up, I'd just located

Chicago below, plucking it out from what looked more like an old LANDSAT photo of the Midwest than the real thing, when I felt a feathery touch on my elbow and turned around, a little too quickly for my aching head, to face those endlessly deep eyes.

This time I swam in them. They were like warm pools, so soothing that the muscles in my neck relaxed as if a masseuse had just gone over them. Those eyes went on almost forever. There were flecks of green and gray and brown that pulled me in and in—and then suddenly I hit a wall of fuzziness. The child in there turned into something more primitive than childhood, and I found myself abruptly out of her eyes and aware of myself.

"I hope I'm not disturbing..."

Again that whisper-voice; so low I should have wanted to bend my ear down to her. But instead I heard every word distinctly.

"Of course not," I blurted out. "I'm just staring at my hometown." I pointed down, to where the Earth's rotation had turned Chicago into Denver, mercifully leaving the stretches of parched farmland between unseen.

"Well, it was—"

She put a ringed finger on my arm and it tingled.

"I was there once." She seemed doubtful. I looked down to see the dog sitting there, quiet as a mouse next to her. He was staring at where I'd been pointing, a look of confusion on his face. That dog knew he wasn't looking at Chicago.

I looked at Rayla and said, "I haven't seen you around."

She looked up at me, and a smile crossed her face, illuminating it. Raphael would have painted a face like this; did, I think. A child's face on a woman.

"They don't let me. I shouldn't be out now."

"Why not?"

Again she seemed unsure. "They say they don't want me to hurt myself."

The dog seemed nearly certain of that.

"You look perfectly capable of walking to me. Dancing, even."

Again she smiled. "I used to love to dance. I danced once, in New York. In the ballet. And somewhere else...." She paused, much too long for what she wanted. "I was 19."

"You don't look more than 19 now."

"I'm...not." There was a genuine look of loss on her face. I saw now how tightly she clutched the dog's thin gold leash.

"What's his name?" I asked, trying to bring her back.

"Half Moon."

She put her hand on my arm again and let me swim once more in the wells of her eyes. For all I knew, Chicago, along with the rest of the sick Earth, passed again and again below us.

A commotion around us finally registered on my ears. A couple of beefy young gentlemen appeared, one of them the chilly fellow I'd talked to outside the restricted section. He gave me a look as if the trouble he was in was all my fault. I tried to open my mouth, but they all made believe I wasn't there while they hustled Rayla and the dog away. I noticed the care with which they did it; no one actually touched her, but they herded her as if they were sheepdogs and she the prize sheep.

In a moment I was alone again, with my thoughts and now a cloud-covered San Francisco below me. Rather than wait for Chicago again and dwell on all that ruined soil, I sought out Gerry and Anderson to see if they would trade any more of their bourbon for my further losses at poker.

A golfball-sized chunk of the *Abraxas's* front quartz window found its way through the hull of the space station.... The outer shell sealed itself, saving the pressure and air inside the cabin, but when they found her, the dog was dying and so was Rayla.

since they meant my work would be threatened. He said something about "not being able to help me anymore on this thing," and that space on Oogie, he now understood, was much tighter than he had been told, and that they might have to bring me down after the next crop of test animals was shipped up on the *Abraxas*. I had my glasses on when I spoke to him, but if I'd really been seeing I would have been able to count the government men perched on his shoulder, telling him what to say. They didn't have to be there, or say anything, of course, since he knew just what was going on; and if saving himself meant sacrificing his son or his son's career, they didn't have to bother using the shuttle to get me back down. A swift kick on the butt of a partially oxygenated pressure suit in the general direction of Edwards would have been fine with him.

ANOTHER WEEK WENT BY, AND IT WAS LEFT TO HENDERSON, my sour roommate, to finally pull the steel curtain down on my head. I should have known he was government right away. If I had been a novelist I would actually have picked Leafier as the undercover man, since he actually turned out to be a pretty good card player and as witty and cheerful as I'd first thought. But sure enough, the clichéd Henderson it was.

He got into it abruptly one night, just as I reached up to flick out the overhead lamp on my top bunk. I thought he was asleep. I could count on one finger the number of times we'd actually slept in this room at the same time since we'd docked two months before, or had even had a conversation consisting of anything but the normal pleasantries. But tonight he was chatty and got right to the point.

"You're a stupid little bastard, Tate."

His voice was sullen but firm—Marines or Air Force back there somewhere in his past.

"Pardon me?" For a moment I lay staring at the ceiling a foot from my head, but then I jumped to the floor to face him. He was just lighting a cigarette.

THREE WEEKS PASSED. MY CHEMICAL-fed tissue was doing exactly what I knew it would, and for all I knew (and secretly hoped) would keep on doing that, leaving me vast stretches of time to brood. I wanted to see Rayla again. Something told me to stay away; the signals were clear but there were other signals, stronger and more deeply rooted in my own tissues, that told me I didn't give a damn about the military-types or the obvious fact that something was wrong with her. I'd spent so many years on my work and little else, that I spent most of this three weeks trying desperately to talk myself out of the fact that I was suddenly very bored with the effects of zero-G on biological tissue. Part of it was a manifestation of my guilt over not trying to do something about the ravaged planet I saw below me. What I was mostly doing was trying by every means available to talk myself out of the fact that I was in love with Rayla, had been from that first meeting.

I had a call from my father at some point during this time. That alone should have told me that something was very wrong with what I was doing, but at the time it just registered as another in a series of dull, time-passing events.

My father and I had never gotten along; I used to say I got my will to work from him and whatever human attributes I possessed from my mother. There were murky hints in his call, hints which should immediately have set off all the alarm bells in my head

"You've made things mighty shitty for me the last four weeks," he said.

"Did I take your toothpaste or something?"

He turned his eyes on me—steel blue. The whole thing was obviously for effect, the slow turn of the bullet head, the calm, measured stare, the blow of gray smoke through tight lips—and at that moment I saw it all laid out like a cold breakfast. They were sending me home.

"I'm glad they're sticking it to your old man too," he said. "The few times I met him he was a real pain in the ass."

"What in hell are you talking about?" I demanded, though of course I already knew.

He dealt it all out for me. *Abraxas* would be back in two days, and all my "crap" and I would get on it. If I ever so much as whispered to a mountain that I'd seen Rayla on board Oogie, the echo would come back to him and he'd personally plant my mouth on his knuckles. Or, he promised, he would do worse. It occurred to me this guy was no ordinary government goon.

"Go back to Chicago," he went on, "or wherever you want to go to cry your puppy-love tears, but don't ever think about seeing the girl again. Pick up on your bookworm career. We won't get in the way if you're a good boy."

"What is it about her?" I said, controlling my voice as best I could. I have to admit I was a little afraid of anyone who could pull the plug on my father. "What happened to her, and what are they doing to her here?"

But he'd snuffed his cigarette out in true tough-guy fashion and turned his back to me, apparently asleep.

It wasn't until I'd put the lamp out over my bunk and lay for a long time with my hands behind my head, until I finally began to drift off, that I heard him say, in a voice crueler or kinder than the one he'd used before, I didn't know which, "She's in love with you, too."

TWO DAYS LATER THE *ABRAXAS* DOCKED WITH OOGIE, BUT NOT in the docking bay.

Later, much later, I read an official report that said one of the animals on board, a chimp, had either let himself out of his caging or, more likely and less provable, had been let out by Anderson or Gerry. Beautiful, pert Gerry. I'm sure they thought he couldn't get in the way. He somehow did, throwing the main engines into a quick burn when the shuttle was only 500 yards from Oogie. The two pilots were killed; so was the chimp and all the other test animals on board. A technician in back with the animals was also killed.

When it hit, the *Abraxas* tore one spoke of the "H" almost clean off. There was one docking tech killed but, miraculously, there were no other official personnel in the area at the time. The rest of the station was sealed off.

But there was, it turned out, one unofficial person in the area. Once again, Rayla had eluded her thick-headed guards and wandered off. She had somehow found out that I was being sent packing, had come to watch the docking and eventual undocking, and was in the observation cabin next to the bay when the shuttle came in.

A golfball-sized chunk of the *Abraxas*'s front quartz window found its way through the hull of the space station, and through the dog, Half Moon, as well. The outer shell sealed itself, saving the pressure and air inside the cabin, but when they found her, the dog was dying and so was Rayla.

THEY KEPT THE TWO OF THEM ALIVE WHILE HENDERSON explained to me the golden opportunity I had to redeem myself and my father and do a great service for my country. He put on quite an act.

I said, "Tell me how it first happened."

"I can't."

"Tell me."

Part of him, a slice of the government part, and maybe a slice of the rest of him down deep in there somewhere, caved in. "She has something in her head. A word. She was in Bangkok three months

ago, with a dance troupe. She was out sightseeing by herself when a defecting Chinese biologist mistook her for one of our people. The deal was that when the biologist met our operative, he'd say the one word, a formula component, which made him so valuable. Then we'd take him in.

"He said the word to Rayla—our operative was a half block away when this happened and saw him speak—and then his head was blown off by a sniper. The same bullet entered Rayla's brain."

"So you did what you'd do for any American citizen in trouble, right?"

"We did what we had to. We needed what she had. She was almost dead when we got to her. With the brain damage she had, she would have been a vegetable for the rest of her life, if she didn't die. Our only chance was to try and restore enough of her brain, so that we could get what we needed. And maybe save her life, too. We put a biochip network in, nurtured it, then started rebuilding.

"It worked—to a point. All of this had been successful with animals, but we found that though the network did what we wanted it to—copied and restored damaged parts of the brain—we had something like a tissue rejection problem. The brain could be restored and healed, but her own brain wouldn't coexist physically in her skull with the new, artificial tissue our biochip was cultivating. The network was allowed to take what it needed from her brain and manufacture new tissue, but her original brain matter refused to accept the new brain matter and integrate with it. Electrically, there was nothing wrong; the axons between old and new brain simply refused to fire. It was like two people in love who can't stand to be in the same room together.

"We ended up with, essentially, 70 percent of Rayla's original brain, unwilling to accept in her skull the other, new 30 percent. Each part was useless without the other; the word we needed was suspended somewhere between the two. She didn't even remember meeting the Chinese biologist. You have to understand, Tate, there's still so much about brain function that we know absolutely nothing about. We know how some of it works; we know how the connections are made and how the electrical system works, but how the hell does it all make a mind?"

"We tried the only thing left. We found Half Moon, whose own brain, after we removed a good bit of it, became host to the biochip sections we'd nurtured, without rejecting them. The two parts of Rayla's brain keep communication with one another through a microwave relay system; like I said, we can do the electrical part. What we did, and it worked, was put the two lovers in separate rooms and give them a telephone.

"Unfortunately, we found that even the dog would not play host the way we needed. The dog's brain, simply because it is a dog's brain and not a human's, was slowly rejecting the human biochip network. Complicating matters was the fact that the two brains, Rayla's and Half Moon's, were interacting."

That explained the dual looks, the sometimes lost expression on her face. I said, "You didn't get the word you needed."

"That's the bottom line, Tate. And the longer we had to wait, the less chance we had of getting it before it dropped down into the place between, like a rock down a chasm." He gave me his steel-blue stare. "So we got her up here to make another try at joining the two sections in her own skull, utilizing a few zero-G techniques. It still didn't work. Now the dog's all but dead, and the new animals *Abraxas* was hauling up are dead, too. Which leaves us with nothing but you."

He knew what I would say; he'd known it when he started his speech. But his training and all his goon years had taught him that this was the way it had to be done. Explain it all, or as little as you could get away with, give the subject the democratic choice of saying no. Then if he said no, crack him over the head and do what you wanted anyway. Although I could tell that there was a little piece of him under all those layers of skin that didn't like the way he had to do things, I knew the rest of him at this moment was thinking of what best to hit me over the head with if I made the wrong choice.

"And you want my brain for a temporary host."

"You're the only one left up here who isn't needed for the operation. We'll tap it on. We're 98 percent sure your brain tissue will accept it, the way the dog's did. You won't even know it happened. We'll keep you unconscious for the week it'll take to get another shuttle of animals up here."

"You won't leave me unconscious. Not completely. You'll pick my brain while she's in there to get that word out."

He tried to look away. "She'll die otherwise."

"She'll die anyway and you know it. I think that's what makes you feel bad. I doubt you'll get another match for her with a dog or chimp in the next six months. Not one that'll hold, anyway. And if you get what you want out of her, why bother? Somebody higher up will tell you not to waste the taxpayers' money."

He took out his cigarette pack, looked down calculatingly at it.

"I'll do it," I said, "but I want it permanent. Instead of tapping it in, scoop out whatever you need to fit it in my skull. Like the dog, the biochip can take care of both of us."

The cigarette he was shaking out fell to the floor. "No way."

"Do it or she'll die. I'd rather see her dead now than let you pick at her like a cold steak for however long you need her. And I want it in writing, with three witnesses, one of them my father. If you screw up, or kill me later on, or get in my way, I want it on his head. Also, I want him left alone. I know him. He won't keep it to himself, he'll make sure his own ass is covered. And if you bust up, he'll make sure a few of the right people know about what you did."

"No," he said.

"You must want that word badly," I said, playing my last card but knowing it was a fourth ace. "What is it—one of those formulas that we have to have so that we can destroy millions of people and nobody else can? A new form of biological warfare? A deadly virus? Well, I'm all you've got and this is the only way you get me."

He gave me his best steely-eyed stare, but he nodded and said, "All right, Tate. We'll do it your way."

Then he suddenly took my arm in an iron grip. His cold blue eyes came within inches of my own.

"But I want you to know how wrong you are," he said. "That word won't destroy millions of people. It will save millions of people. It's a cure for the blight. The Chinese were going to blackmail us with it. They blew their own man's head to pieces to keep it away from us."

And suddenly, startlingly, I knew that he was telling the truth. I saw the pain at the back of those ice-blue eyes and knew that I had been wrong about Henderson. When the hardest decisions have to be made, someone has to make them. It had just been Henderson's bad luck to be on duty when this one had to be made.

I knew now what the tone in his voice had meant when he told me Rayla was in love with me.

"I don't want her to die any more than you do, Tate," he nearly hissed. "But—"

"Let's go get your word," I said.

IN 20 MINUTES HE HAD IT ALL LAID OUT THE WAY I WANTED IT. MY father looked grim, but quickly agreed to everything. I had a hard time with the last look he gave me before they cut the video, because he'd never looked at me like that before. It scared me, because the bastard looked proud of me—not of what I was doing, but of the way I'd pulled the chain on him and on

She was almost dead.... With the brain damage she had, she would have been a vegetable for the rest of her life.... Our only chance was to try and restore enough of her brain, so that we could get what we needed. We put a biochip network in, nurtured it, then started rebuilding.

everybody else. I suddenly wasn't sure I didn't have too much of him in me after all.

They prepped me and then rolled me into the secret wing. Appropriately, the area was painted drab green.

My heart almost stopped, which would have saved them the trouble of cutting me open, when I saw Rayla. She looked as thin as one of my wrists, and wilted, like a corsage the morning after the prom, or a dead butterfly. They had opened Half Moon up like a can of baked beans; it was obvious that if they pulled one wire out of him, he'd be gone. Leafier, it turned out, was the head surgeon; he promised to beat my tail at two-handed poker when he had me back together.

It also turned out they were using a technique they'd spiked from my work. Henderson had been stealing everything I did. I now realized that the single and only reason I'd ever been put up on Oogie—with my father's help—was because they needed my work. So, in essence, they'd been using my brain from the start.

The last thing that floated through my mind before I swam down to the place you go when they operate on you, was a fragment of a line from Goethe: "Two souls dwell...."

IAWOKE DANCING, BUT I COULDN'T OPEN my eyes. I realized I was dreaming, on my slow way back up from the land of surgery. There was a girl in my arms, light as a feather, barefoot, all circles.

The rings on her fingers tinkled like fairy bells, one against the other. We were in a glen of blue and yellow flowers, waltzing round and round. A beautiful butterfly went past, flashing golden wings. The girl was speaking to me, but the words did not come from her mouth. Her lips moved, but only to kiss me, and her voice ran like water through me.

There were two of us in my head. I felt my brain would burst not with pressure but with joy. I was trembling, and looked down to see the girl in my arms melting into my body, our two bodies merging into one. We were somewhere closer than the physical plane. She was silver and I was silver, and our two bodies, together, became gold. I felt her lips, now my lips, move, and she completed that line from Goethe:

"Two souls dwell, alas! in my breast."

I opened my eyes and Rayla's body was there.

She was crying, and I knew that the tears were good ones because, without speaking, she told me so. I saw myself in her eyes. There were whispers of her all through me; I felt her coursing through my veins like sweet red wine. I was there, and so was she, and what I did was open my mouth and ask her if she would like to dance again, in the ballet, in New York, in Bangkok, in Chicago, in Denver.

"Yes," she said, "and with you."

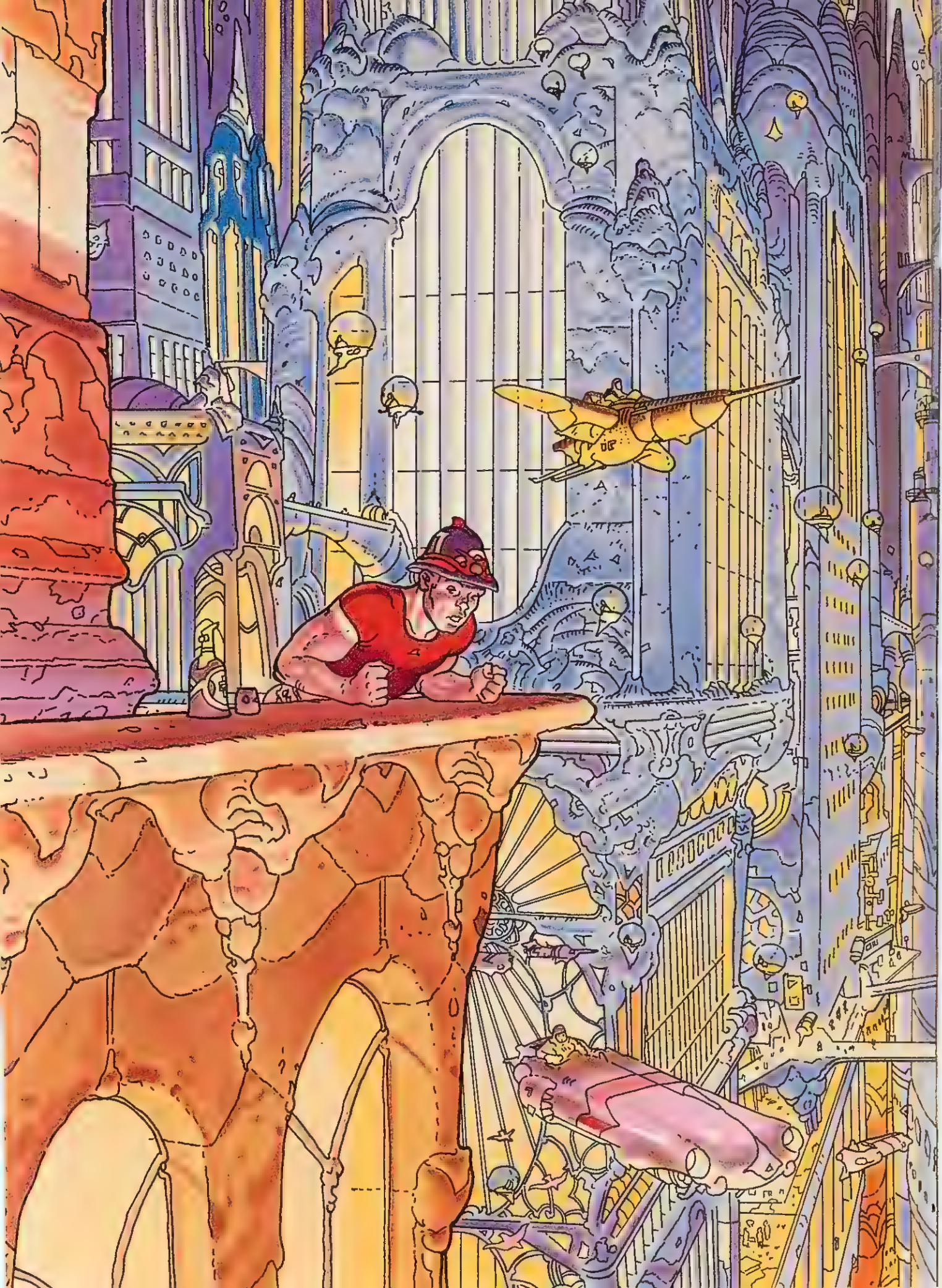
"Good," I said.

All around us there were voices, a chorus of frantic voices that sounded as harsh as the barking of dogs.

Suddenly I saw the flicker of something between Rayla and me—a single soft word that I could not quite read as it tumbled down away from us.

Together we reached down and caught it, then handed it up above us until it was taken.

The chorus of barking became very loud and filled with excitement. But we didn't hear it, because Rayla was in my arms, and I in hers. And our dance began. □



The ancient enclosed city had many Levels, which the rules said should remain forever separate. Even in the future, however, some taboos will be too tempting to remain unbroken.

DOWN ON THE 01 LEVEL

BY GENE O'NEILL
Illustration by Moebius

THE THICK, YELLOW-BROWN HAZE CLINGS TO THE ROLLING, GOLDEN HILLS, ALMOST concealing the old freeway, a faded-gray, broken road, its white divider stripes long gone, only an overhead green sign left to indicate the exit to a rusted-out *nowhere*. Suddenly a figure appears in the polluted haze under the useless sign. It's a man, ambling slowly—the gait of an experienced hiker. He wears old-style, threadbare clothes and carries a backpack; and there is nothing remarkable about him in any way except for his bizarre color. Every inch of exposed skin is dyed a deep crimson, the color of fresh blood. The Crimson Man pauses, then leaves the road for the shade of a lonely live oak. But before he can even remove his pack, two horsemen ride into view from the hills to the east. Both riders are heavily dressed for the muggy heat—longcoats made from blanket remnants decorated with charms and dangling amulets, faded neckerchiefs over their faces, and dirty wide-rimmed hats pulled down low. Without a word, one rider levels an old rifle at the Crimson Man, signaling for him to turn about and remain still, while the other horseman dismounts and rips open the back of the dyed man's shirt. The dismounted man reaches up to his saddlehorn, takes off a bullwhip, and uncoils it slowly as he judges the distance separating him from the Crimson Man. Then he lashes out with the whip, splitting open the back of the dyed man. Another pair of cutting lashes and the Crimson Man slumps to his knees, his head on his chest, his red back streaked with real blood. The man with the bullwhip moves close, jerks the dyed man's head up, and gestures with the butt of his whip in the direction of the old highway. The Crimson Man nods before letting his head drop back to his chest. Then the dismounted man curls the whip, mounts, and both horsemen ride off, kicking up a cloud of dust that mixes with the clinging filthy haze....

A GENTLE BUMP AGAINST MY SHOULDER AND a barely audibly whispered "Sandoval!" near my ear interrupted my concentration on the

*Down, down and away
out of sight
to a lower Level
of perverse delight...*

*Dyed and banished Outside,
to wander and yearn,
dreaming of a life Inside,
but, alas, never to return.*

—“Bobber Blues,” Riga Maroux

Outside confrontation between the two Freeman and dyed murderer.

I tapped the spectacles, which opaqued briefly as the re-creation disappeared. On the other side of the cleared-off dining table, Kinjo and Sedalia, who were both smiling, stared back, apparently expecting some kind of response from me.

So I grinned and nodded; and the pair, apparently satisfied, turned back to each other, chuckling as if I were a slow student finally making the appropriate response, and continued their conversation. I sighed under my breath and glanced sheepishly at Oberon, who sat next to me and had bumped my shoulder.

She made a stern face, nodding in the direction of the couple on the other side of the table.

Feeling a little guilty about activating the spectacles during the supposedly important dinner interview, I looked at the other two across the table and tried to concentrate on their conversation. It was no use. Again they were involved in another tidbit of gossip about some obscure medical administrator. Both Kinjo and Sedalia were highly-placed

bureaucrats at the Medcenter, and had spent the evening discussing *their* jobs, bosses, and associates.

But I had to admit they were attractive people, especially Sedalia, her intricate silver facial and body tattoos forming a fascinating arabesque against her dark, almost, indigo skin color. Potentially they would've made a physically exciting quad-bond with Oberon and me... except they were both so incredibly boring!

The crowd reeled back from two figures dashing by the far side of the fountain, naked of garment or tattoos.... In pursuit were three black-clad Companymen.

And now they were giggling loudly, their behavior attracting the attention of several nearby quads, also dining in the elegant Terrace Cafe. I looked over at Oberon.

She lifted her eyebrows, as if asking: *Well?*

Making an exaggerated grimace, I shrugged.

Oberon nodded and grinned wryly. She obviously agreed with my assessment.

Looking again at Kinjo, I almost laughed aloud. The iridescent dragon adorning the man's athletic body glared fiercely with ruby eyes, snorting puffs of fiery smoke from its flared nostrils, a frighteningly powerful masculine image that contrasted sharply with his high-pitched giggling. I glanced back at Oberon, who looked as if she'd like to borrow my spectacles. I leaned close and bumped her shoulder.

She stuck her tongue out at me.

Oberon worked in the Great Library, a historian/sociologist like myself; but she was able to understand all the major languages of the last century and did research almost exclusively on old-time vids. I was an associate reader, working with English print from various Levels, seeing only an occasional old-time book from Outside. She, too, was unusually attractive, but in a garish kind of way, her facial and body tattoos a patchwork of clashing images in glowing neon colors—almost a harlequin. And her personality complimented her gaudy appearance, always alive and upbeat, constantly finding something challenging and fascinating to do or talk about. Yet it was her almond-shaped, dark blue eyes that I found especially provocative—so promising of sexual adventure. And despite the prohibition of sex outside a sanctioned quad-bond, we had been together numerous times.

Yes, Oberon would make an ideal fem in a quad-bond. But so far, no luck finding the other two, and we'd been interviewing the last year. Half-jokingly she said it was all my fault, the bad luck caused by my strict upbringing that made me too judgmental, requiring standards too demanding on others. Of course she'd agreed with all my vetos. But she had a point about my background.

I'd been raised on a hydroponic farm, out near the rim of the Level. It was very conservative; I was taught to obey all the rules. My favorite quad mother, who smelled faintly of fresh lemon leaves, had often admonished my transgressions, leaning close and gently whispering in her soft melodic voice: *The rules, the rules, Luis, they are made to protect us.* And I'd often asked: *From whom or from what?* She'd always raised her eyebrows and remained non-committal, like a professor awaiting a student's answer to his own question. Of course back then I was sure she meant one of the many horrors from Outside. But she'd never responded to any of my answers; and the mystery remained....

So, I'd come to Central Level as a young man with the burden of a finely-developed conscience, and had often spent a sleepless, guilt-ridden night after a wet and wild sexual encounter with

Oberon, my mother's melodic whisper ringing in my ears.

"Oh, no, not tonight!" Kinjo said, twisted around in his seat and pointing, the mix of disgust and horror in his tone destroying my reverie.

The Terrace Cafe juttled out a story above the plaza, and just beyond our balcony I spotted the Tattletale that had blinked into existence, the holographic face of a masked Companymen revolving slowly. "Emergency, emergency," it blared over the crowd looking upward. "Make way for the Companymen near the north side of the plaza fountain!"

All four of us moved close to the railing, leaning out to catch a better view of the hubbub taking place near the fountain on the plaza.

"Bobbbers, bobbbers," the Tattletale warned.

The crowd, reacting as one, reeled back from two figures dashing by the far side of the fountain, both wearing colorful funmasks but naked of garment or tattoos, their pale, bare bodies more revelatory of their lower

Level status than the screaming Tattletale. In pursuit were three black-clad Companymen. Then another lawman appeared, cutting off the pair of nude runners.

"Bobbbers," Sedalia said, swallowing and making a face as if the word were a bitter pill.

"Get 'em...yeah," Kinjo yelled down, as if rooting for a side in a game. The Companymen had caught the bobbbers, beat them to their knees with batons, and were now hooking up come-along-stuns. The entire chase and capture had lasted about 30 seconds. A rumble, then a cheer finally went up from the plaza crowd, before everyone began to return to their routine.

"Filthy, naked, disgusting, low-level, perverted..." Sedalia said, apparently unable to come up with anything else vile enough to describe her feelings.

"I'd hate to be in their places, now," Kinjo added, a slight frown marring his facial tattoos. "A color judgment for those two, banishment Outside—"

"Maybe not," Oberon said, shaking her head, a kind of sexual excitement evident in her husky tone. I noticed her eyes seemed unusually bright. I wondered what she was thinking.

"Oberon's right, Kinjo," I finally agreed, after looking back down where the crowd had closed in around the fountain. The Companymen and their charges were gone. "If they have done nothing but streak across the plaza, then they may just be sent to the sen-dep tanks for a little reprogramming. They appear to be only youngsters by their immature bodies, lack of apparel and markings...."

"Dreadful nakedness and probably carrying some kind of disease," Sedalia murmured, her attractive features regaining their normal expression, as she glanced in my direction.

I shook my head, as we took our places back at the table. I knew that bobbing was a kind of rite of passage for several of the Lower Levels' adolescents. Still it was extremely unusual for them to pick the Top Level to streak, with its high degree of security and monitoring devices. The lower the Level, the less security, and the less chance of being apprehended so soon after surfacing. Ah, well, I thought—

"What do you mean, *no*?" Sedalia challenged me, anger evident in her tone.

"Yeah, what are you saying?" Kinjo added, both staring at me directly, as if demanding an answer.

"They're just boys up from a lower Level, probably not sexually active yet. In any event they are probably both sexually inhibited, if they haven't bonded yet—"

"Probably, *probably*," Kinjo said mockingly. "You don't know a damn thing, Sandoval. If they're up from 01, inhibition is strictly voluntary. They could *both* be carrying Frost, that's why bobbing is such a serious sexual crime."

I almost laughed at the paranoia evident in his tone.

FR-ST, Fatal Rickettsia-Sexually Transmitted, had been a hideous

disease, but only *one* of many old-time Outside terrors, and I hadn't heard the spoken acronym in a long time. But it had been very appropriate, the disease very soon after contact causing a telltale, pale-bluish, frosted countenance in its victim, similar to the chilling effect of being unprotected in sub-zero weather.

"Hey, drift back, Kinjo," I finally said, still smiling. "Frost is over; there hasn't been a case reported in years."

"Uh-huh," he replied, a kind of half smirk on his face as he leaned forward pugnaciously, "there was a skullmask reported on *this* Level at the Medcenter only last week."

Skullmask? He was referring to the final stage of the old disease, when the victim's face changed from the telltale frosty paleness to an atrophied, skeletal deathhead. "Last week?" I'd heard nothing. And I'd seen nothing like this in the recent records. "Who reported it? Or did you actually see the patient?"

Kinjo leaned back, his upper body losing some of its aggressive posture. "No I didn't see the victim, and I'm not sure who did...ah, Sedalia?"

"I heard it after a staff meeting last Friday," she said, but her tone lacked confidence. "Apparently, a case manager heard it from a medtech who works on the critical ward of the center—"

"More gossip," I snapped, "just like the rest of the evening. Is that all you both know?" I was angry, now. "Look, I haven't read of a case of Frost in over two decades. It would be published at least in one of the medical or health journals." I shook my head and frowned dismissively. "And those boys bobbing...why that's little more than a adolescent prank. The laws are really archaic, you know.... Come on, Kinjo, Sedalia, admit that you've both considered bobbing. Seeing how lower Levels, other classes live. It'd be intriguing, fascinating even—"

"Enough!" Sedalia cried out, bouncing to her feet. "That's *heresy*, criminal, and should be reported to Central Control.... As far as me considering you in a quad-bond, Sandoval, *forget it*." She looked at Oberon and snapped unsincerely, "Sorry, my dear." Then she began to walk off. "Coming, Kinjo?" They both left without looking back.

I just sat there for a moment, then looked at Oberon, who had remained remarkably quiet during the angry interchange. She nodded, putting her hand to her mouth, trying to restrain a grin.

Then we were both laughing, so hard tears streamed down our cheeks. I pulled myself together. "Can you imagine being bonded to those two, really?"

This stimulated another round of laughter.

Then, Oberon's expression grew sober, and she asked kind of cautiously, "Did you really mean it, about bobbing? You know, trying it?"

I stared at her a moment. She was indeed serious.

"Sure I meant it."

She smiled. "How about right now? Anything planned?"

I hesitated for a moment. I'd really meant what I said about dropping down to another Level. After all, I was part sociologist. But right at this moment? What if we were caught? We could be dyed blue as sexual criminals and banished to roam Outside. I stared back silently for a second or two, realizing I was caught.

"Hey, why not," I finally replied, trying to feign a nonchalance I really didn't feel. "Start our four days off right."

"Okay," she said simply, standing and taking my hand. "Let's do it."

In the street beyond the restaurant Oberon stopped, her eyes bright with mischief, and after looking about cautiously, she took out a pair of metallic cards from the purse attached to her hip.

Once they had been blue and gold, but much of the color had worn off.

"What are they?" I asked curiously, knowing they had something to do with bobbing.

"They open the door of a transporter booth—"

"A what?"

Of course I'd heard of the booths, but I'd assumed they were just part of the mythology of the Levels. They didn't really exist. The Levels had been sealed off by the Company many years ago, right after the first few cases of Frost had been discovered on the 01 Level. And it was assumed bobbbers from below came up through the old power ductwork, ventilation shafts, or some such way, a grueling ordeal requiring days and the carrying of water and rations. But a number of times I'd thought of color judgments, and I couldn't help wondering how dyed criminals were transported Outside.

Oberon was nodding, as if privy to my silent speculation. "They're real and I know the location of one. I also know where we can bob, have a wonderful time, and *never* be caught." She had her hands on her hips, her gaudy tattoos and stance indicating her silent dare: *How about it, big mouth?*

I sucked in a deep breath, considering several arguments why this was a very bad idea. Basically we would be breaking a strict rule. I restrained a shiver, imagining the smell of fresh lemon leaves. But, finally, stiff with uncertainty, fear, and excitement, I said hoarsely. "You've been down before? To what Level?"

She didn't answer, only took my hand again. "We're wasting time."

WE WERE LOOKING INTO A DARK RECESS IN THE SUBLEVEL wall, a pair of smooth metallic doors meeting together. She slipped her card in a slot in the wall and the doors slid apart.

Inside now, Oberon flicked on a light. "Sit," she instructed me, letting go of my hand. We were in a tiny cubicle, a bench running along the side wall, wide enough to accommodate us both. We sat, turned, and faced a panel with rows of numbered buttons near the closed doors, the numbers apparently corresponding to the Levels. She selected one on the bottom row.

The light dimmed, then momentarily blinked out, and for a few moments I felt like I was falling rapidly, dropping down, down into the dark unknown.

We stopped abruptly.

The doors slid apart.

We stepped out of the transporter, and like a tour guide, Oberon announced, "Welcome to the legendary 01 Level." We were in a dark alley, dimly-lit openings at both ends, but to the right the way was

The light dimmed, then momentarily blinked out, and for a few moments I felt like I was falling rapidly, dropping down, down into the dark unknown.

partially obstructed by litter. I stumbled along, following Oberon to the left.

We reached the mouth of the alley and stopped, my senses bombarded by the strangeness of it all.

Back up on Top Level, everything was all chrome and stainless steel, forever bright daylight, an impression of order and cleanliness.

Here it was obviously different: *Nighttime*—a humid darkness surrounded my body down here at street level, but there were all kinds of lights up there among the high-rises stretching up into the night. Everywhere along the facades windows gleaming like pale rectangular eyes stared into the muggy darkness, and advertisements cast their neon-green, -red, -yellow, and -orange messages in English and Korean and Japanese and a few symbols I didn't recognize. There were rich, pungent odors—meats roasting, spices, and a sickening-sweet smell of decay; sounds clashed dissonantly—humans shouting, screaming, and laughing, and vehicles screeching,

and braking, and even sirens screaming like animals in pain; and the air was constantly charged with a tingling electric excitement. It was an almost overwhelming barrage of sensory impressions; the Level seemed so dirty, dangerous, and decadent. I loved it—!

Just at that moment, I shrank back into the shadows as two black-clad figures passed by, carrying batons and come-along-stuns. "Company-men," I whispered to Oberon, feeling vulnerable, our tattooed faces an obvious giveaway that we were Upper Level boppers.

"Hey, we're just tourists to them, no problem" she said, ignoring the two law officers and glancing at me with her sexy eyes. "Now, we need two new *personas*."

I had no answer to that, just following as she quickly led me out into the crowd on the passing thoroughfare.

IN A FEW MINUTES WE WERE IN A MUCH BUSIER AREA, PEOPLE shoulder-to-shoulder, jostling each other as they went in and out of the surrounding businesses. "You can be anyone here," Oberon announced, as we stopped and surveyed the cluster of shops, all offering different personas. I glanced around, reading the bright script, most of it in English. The closest one described its service in bright neon-blue, *Neo-Images*. Another, in neon-green, proclaimed *Be all you can be*. Then my gaze wandered across the street to the shining golden script on a large shop attracting many customers: *Other Levels*. Ah, I thought, realizing that was the reason no one paid attention to our tattoos. Before I had time to speak, Oberon hustled me into a small hole-in-the-wall shop, offering: *Outside Vid Stars Of The Past*.

Inside, the walls were lined with plastic covered posters of faces of both men and women. The shop was busy but not jammed like some of the others, apparently not offering the most popular images.

I whispered to her, "Are these people boppers?"

"No," she said, shushing me. "Many live here on 01."

I glanced around again and restrained a chuckle. Most of the customers didn't look much different in manner and dress than the posters on the walls, the *new* images they were considering—

"This is you, Sandoval." Oberon was pointing at a man with close-cropped sandy hair, sideburns, faded-denim eyes, and a ruggedly handsome face. "Steve McQueen. He was quite the movie star at one time."

I nodded, remembering the old term.

"I'm always Cher," she explained excitedly, indicating a gaunt

The tech slipped a rectangular chip into Oberon's powerpack, "Okay, you're good for about five hours of continuous use, then you need to peel off the simsuit, because you can burn badly after that. Okay?"

As he talked, Oberon was framed by a thin neon-blue tracing that flared, then blinked-out, and she was Cher. A grinning Cher.

In a moment, I was Steve McQueen.

"Okay, now we have some fun," Cher announced.

I'D ASSUMED THAT ALL THIS EFFORT WAS PERHAPS DIRECTED toward an evening of sex between Oberon and I. Why go to all the trouble to drag me along, if not? And, in fact, not far from the persona shops, we'd passed a kind of high-class cabaret area, including a number of hotels. We returned to the area.

But I was wrong.

We moved past a hotel to a glitzy nightclub called: *The House of the Rising Sun*.

Inside, Oberon, in her persona, was greeted warmly by many people we elbowed past on the way to a little stage. "Hey, Babe," someone shouted at her, "are you singing tonight?"

Oberon nodded.

And after a live band finished a number, the announcer invited her onstage. She began to sing in a kind of gaudy but sexy style, the first number something about *being born in the wagon of a traveling show*.... The audience crowded close, clapping and hooting. And it was obvious that if I were to be included in Oberon's evening of entertainment, it was to be much later. She was having a grand time, working the crowd, actually making a kind of love to the collective body—she was in her element.

FINALLY, I WANDERED OFF, OUT OF THE CLUB AND AWAY FROM the brightly lit-up cabaret area. Just walking, enjoying the muggy night that pressed down on the Level with its promise of excitement.

Suddenly, along a very dimly-lit section, two women dressed in gala modtrend blocked my way.

"Hey, you want to have a party?" the closest one asked. She smiled, her gaudy makeup and dark red lipstick highlighting her provocative smile; and as she moved closer her garment colors lightened, faded, and turned transparent. I was close enough to touch any part of her well-endowed nakedness. I wondered if they wore personas

or perhaps they were just 01 Level citizens, working the tourist trade; but as I dropped my gaze, staring at her pubic triangle dyed a fuzzy-pink, I decided I didn't really care, because I felt a tightness growing in my groin area. Yes, I was slightly aroused by this, this...sleazy encounter; and I ignored the melodic whisper at my ear.

"I don't know," I managed to answer, glancing at the other woman, "do you mean all three of us?" She was a younger version of the speaker.

"Sure, man, whatever, you know," she said in a husky tone, her modtrend shifting

through several colors before turning transparent and revealing a boyish nakedness, her thin frame contoured by modest breasts and hips. She licked her full lips in a contrived suggestive manner.

Still I might have resisted, paid attention to the whisper lingering at my ear; except neither woman wore any facial or body tattoos, which accentuated their exotic nakedness, and this fact more than any of their clumsy maneuvers inflamed my desire.

I was hooked.

ABOUT AN HOUR LATER, FEELING MORE THAN JUST GUILTY—kind of empty and unfulfilled by the strictly commercial encounter—I wandered into a small bar called *Muddy Waters*. There were about seven or eight customers at tables gathered around a singer, who was sitting on a stool on a small

As I weaved through the debris, I spotted a pair of silhouettes in the light at the other end. I moved more cautiously, recognizing the two to be Company-men...

woman with long black ringlets, wearing a dress that covered none of her rather modest endowments, including a tiny tattoo near her dark pubic patch.

After making our choices, we were escorted by a clerk into what appeared to be a dressing room, complete with a long closet and mirrored walls. A tech handed Oberon a garment from the closet, murmuring, "Simsuit." The plastic-like material was clear, containing a spidery network of fine wire and an occasional chip about the size of a thumbnail. "Here you are," the tech announced, flipping me a similar garment. "I'll dial up your personas." He went to a terminal, punched out a pair of codes, and waited.

Oberon and I slipped into the lightweight simsuits. Resting below our shoulders were the powerpacks, about the size of a deck of cards.

stage, strumming an acoustic guitar.

She was singing old-time stuff, and her sad, melancholy voice was haunting, very effective. I ordered a drink, took a seat at an empty table, and relaxed, listening to her perform.

A placard on a small easel gave her name: Riga Maroux.

As I listened and watched, I was struck by her unusual looks. She wore her hair shoulder-length, and it wasn't really blonde but white, almost silver; and her long face was very pale, high-cheeked, full-lipped, unsmiling; and the eyes... her eyes reflected the metallic quality of her hair. She wore a black dress that clung to her tall, athletic body, and no jewelry, except for a pair of dangling silver earrings that reflected the dim light when she looked up from her guitar. Her appearance perfectly matched the sad, haunting voice.

As she finished a number, the customers, all men, clapped softly. That's when I noticed the cigarettes. Several of the customers had been smoking, creating a bluish haze in the dimly-lit interior of the club. Of course I'd read of the old habit, but I didn't know it was still alive, even down here on the 01 Level. But I shouldn't've been surprised: Everything seemed to go here. And the self-destructive old vice seemed to fit in with the music and style of the singer in this little club.

I sat quietly, listening to this woman called Riga Maroux sing and strum the music she called *the blues*, feeling myself strongly attracted to both her and the music. I sent over a drink and put a healthy tip in her tip glass. She nodded her thanks, and later, when she'd finished the long set, she got up and joined me.

"Don't get many tippers in here," she said, and her speaking voice had the same melancholy tone.

"You're really good," I said sincerely. "You ought to be performing in one of the high-rent places." I nodded in the general direction of the glitzy cabarets.

She smiled, sipping her drink, then shook her head. "They can see one of the greats from the last century up there." She mentioned several names, none familiar to me. "I can't compete with them. Not a nobody. And I sing the blues, something that has almost disappeared, you know." With a hint of a smile she added, "Only a few really understand it." She looked around kind of wryly at the few patrons left in the bar.

"Is there anyone on 01 who can sing the blues as well?"

She shrugged and smiled gratefully. "Doesn't really matter, does it?... Now, what's your name, anyhow? I know you're not McQueen."

"Call me Sandoval," I replied, smitten by this woman's talent, unusual looks, and apparent honesty.

"You a bobber, Sandoval?" she asked flatly.

I nodded, not feeling any apprehension in telling the truth, feeling I could trust Riga. "Yes, I am. First time on your Level."

She nodded knowingly.

"And you?"

She chuckled and sighed. "No, I belong down here on the Bottom Level...." Her voice trailed off as her gaze grew distant. I wondered what she was thinking about... some past sin? But I didn't intrude on her obviously sad reverie.

After a long silence we talked for a few minutes more, then I realized my simsuit time was growing short. "I have to go," I announced.

She took my hand in hers. "Wait, I have a song for you before you go," she said. Then as she got up, smoothing out her dress, she asked, "Will you be coming down again?"

Without really thinking, I answered, "Yes, tomorrow night." Of course I wanted to see her again.

On stage once more, she began to sing something she'd written, looking down, her gaze riveting. It was a song about a bobber being caught, receiving a judgment of color, then being cast Outside to wander a pariah, dreaming and yearning to come back Inside. And

though I was pressed for time, I was caught up in the cautionary ballad, unable to pull away.

AFTER LEAVING THE SIMSUIT AT THE SHOP, I'D TAKEN THE WRONG turn back to the alley with the transporter booth, coming up from the littered side. As I weaved through the debris, I spotted a pair of

I slowed as I neared, noticing the two black-clad Companymen loitering on the walkway, searching the crowd.... Were they looking for someone particular? Me?

silhouettes in the light at the other end. I moved more cautiously, finally pausing at the double doors, recognizing the two to be a pair of Companymen, standing back in the shadows, as if they were waiting for someone—

I sucked in a breath, realizing they might have been waiting for Oberon or *me*! And only a stupid miscalculation had saved me from being caught.

Quietly, I slipped into the transporter and headed up.

BACK SAFELY ON THE TOP LEVEL IN MY CONAPT, I CHECKED first on Oberon with the viewphone. She was not back. It wasn't unusual for her to disappear during her four days off. But I wondered if she had stayed down on 01. And was that really safe to do?

Then I sighed and watched a holo message left on my recorder: It was the dragon man, Kinjo, "...yes, two new cases on the 01 Level, both with the characteristic frosty-pale features." He nodded, then with a I-told-you-so look on his tattooed face, he asked, "What do you think of that, Sandoval?"

I shrugged as he blinked from existence. *What* did I think about that? Did I even believe him? I'd check it out later. I made my way into the bedroom and flopped down on the airbed. Although I knew it was a risk, I had to return to *Muddy Waters* and see Riga Maroux again...

SHE WAS AS LOVELY AND SAD AS LAST TIME, BUT SHE WAS WEARING a baggy, grayish shirt and baggy, dark-blue pants, her hair pulled back in a ponytail, which gave her longish features a masculine cast. When I walked in and took a table in front but to the far left of the stage, she was in the middle of the same set as she'd sang last night before coming to visit. But she added the bobber blues piece at the end, obviously for my benefit; and I knew that it was indeed a cautionary warning.

"You look very nice tonight, Riga," I said, greeting her as she came to my table.

"Thank you, Sandoval," she answered, her smile warm but her silverish eyes remaining distant and cool. "I wasn't sure you'd take the risk."

"My friend, the one who brought me last night, says there is no risk," I said, signalling for the waiter. "We are no more than *tourists* on this Level."

She nodded thoughtfully, indicating she'd drink what I was drinking. "I think that's normally the case, and we have very little security down here, few Companymen. But occasionally there is a kind of crackdown for some reason—I think ordered from above, perhaps your Level? Anyhow, it can be dangerous sometimes. So, you are taking a risk."

I thought about the two Companymen apparently lying in ambush yesterday. And wondered about Oberon. Then I pushed the thought

Continued on page 95

The Great Emancipator Octoff Malheiro
was now himself enslaved.
But thanks to a sentient farm, his one
chance at freedom might be death.

The Biomantic's Last Husband

BY RAY ALDRIDGE

Illustration by Doug Andersen

OLD HUSBAND IS DEAD. I FEEL HIS LOSS
in all my minds. The impending
arrival of New Husband consoles
me not at all.

Long ago Old Husband gave me permission
to extend a sensory nexus into his bed-
chamber. At first I grew my eye on the wall
across from the foot of his bed, so I could
always watch him. My mouth and ear flow-
ered on the wall, over the headboard, so we
might whisper together at night. Later he
told me the arrangement disturbed him, so I
gathered my sensors together and arranged
them into the semblance of a trophy-mask
above his bed.

"A decorative effect, love," he said.

But when he lay dying, the headboard hid
his worn-out face from me; I saw only the
trembling of his thin body beneath the cov-
erlet, the aimless kicking of his feet.

He shuddered, and I heard his teeth grind
together as a wave of pain passed through
him. "Dearest," he gasped. "A status report.
Please?"

"Rest," I said.

"Please. It would comfort me."





His voice was already a ghost.

My origin-point slid away, out to the fields. I felt the perfect tilth of my soil, the hot clean fire of bacterial activity, the cool comfort of an optimal moisture band. Old Husband was quiet as I reported, and I think the familiar words did comfort him. I told him of the sun's glow, pouring life into my leaves; I told him of the fullness of my nodes, as bloom approached; I told him of the richness my roots searched out in the darkness.

An ugly sound drew me back to Old Husband's bed; he thrashed, trying to get his breath.

"Darling," I said, "let me bring you ease."

"No...." His voice was so weak. "I must tell you this again. You must remember. They'll want to shut you down."

"Who would wish to do that, Husband?"

I asked, though I had heard all this many times before.

He took a long moment to gather his strength. "SubStraight Corporation...the zombie farmers. Your new owner. They'll send a new Husband, and you mustn't trust him. Must not! His job will be to kill you."

"But why?" I knew the answer, but the conversation seemed to distract him from his pain.

His breathing was rapid, shallow. "The zombie farmers hate you...you're an alternative to the deadfarms, a threat to their monopoly, and they won't feel safe until you're dead and forgotten."

His voice fell low, but I think he said, "You are the last one, you know. The last Biomantic."

Then he spoke more clearly. "They fear you. The deadfarms churn out everything Selevand wants, they say. As long as there are laws to be broken, they won't lack for criminals they can make into zombies. And they can always pass new laws, if the supply falters." His breath whistled, then quieted. "Dearest," he said, at last.

"What shall I do?" I asked, before I noticed that his covertlet no longer moved.

He will live forever in my memory nodes, but it is not the same. I miss him so much.

THE LANDWALKER PICKED ITS WAY CAREFULLY ALONG THE ruined road, its dozen slender legs flashing in the late afternoon light of Selevand Sun. In the sealed cabin, Octoff rode in comfort, insulated from the predators, the diseases, the venomous insects of the jungle...safe from everything except his new owner.

She seemed very young, though he had heard Lanilla Silda was at least 300 years his senior. She wore her pale hair in short tight braids, each braid tipped with a bit of broken blue glass. Several metallic cranial emitters showed above her delicate left ear; one was tuned to the choke band around his throat. Her body was sleek and strong under a clinging unsuit.

Her unremarkable face was placid.

He looked down at his hands, clenched into heavy fists. He raised a hand to his throat, touched the choke band. *I could kill her now, he thought, if not for this thing. How pleasant that would be, to twist her head off.* He fingered the warm carapace of the band, thinking of the powerful mindless muscle that lived inside that armor.

She noticed the movement and turned to him, large green eyes glittering with amusement. "Not too tight, is it, Octoff?"

"No," he said.

"Good. Good." Her voice was bland.

The band tightened, just a little.

Lanilla leaned toward him, smiling. "But there's a look on your face, you know. How shall I describe it? Discomfort? Discontent?" She laughed. "Hatred? But why? I saved you from the deadfarms, didn't I?"

The band tightened a bit more, and spots swam across Octoff's vision. "Yes," he wheezed. "Yes." He remembered the first time he

had seen her, how he had tried to get his hands around her slender neck. The collar had clamped down violently, squeezing the strength out of his body, so that he had fallen down, helpless. Her control of the band was expert. She had been able to keep him conscious while she punished him.

She patted his arm, and the band loosened. "Very good. I'm sure

You stole a hundred high caught you. If zombies cared for freedom, side now.... Help me shut this

you'll prove that bodybroker wrong. 'Yes, the flesh is beautiful, but burn the brain, have him zombied right now, or I'll make no warranties,' he told me. 'This is Octoff Malheiro,' he said, 'a dangerous man, the most notorious emancipator on Selevand.'" She mimicked the portentous tones of the Dilvermoon bodybroker. "And, 'mark my words, he'll be untrainable.' But I took you anyway, because I knew he was wrong. Wrong wrong wrong."

She took his hand and held it to the closure of her unsuit; in her other hand she held a tiny ampule of sparkleglass. She crushed the ampule under his nose. Synthetic desire flamed through him.

After a moment he moved his hand downward and the fabric fell away. Through the urgency of the drug he thought: *this is the only power I have, now.* He lowered his head into the valley between her breasts. His fingers slid down the curve of her belly.

HOURS LATER THE JUNGLE WAS STILL LUSH, WILD, UNCONSTRAINED. Long before the land showed any sign of cultivation, Octoff caught sight of the first harvester. He made some sound of surprise, and Lanilla leaned across him to look.

The harvester was something like a terrestrial baboon, covered in short greenish-white fur, ventral pouches bulging with foraged plants. On one heavy shoulder was a pattern of interlaced crimson chevrons. "The Biomantic's mark," Lanilla said.

It watched them pass, clinging motionless to the trunk of a giant cycad.

Octoff felt a sudden tension in Lanilla, where she pressed against him. "Well," she said, as if to herself. "Well, it knows I'm here."

The land rose, the jungle grew less riotous, and as the sun neared the horizon, they climbed into a region of meticulously cultivated fields. Here the road was in good repair, and the walker's legs spun them swiftly across the darkening landscape.

The manor grounds were surrounded by a high wall. Heavy gates swung open in the twilight.

Lanilla released the safety webbing that held them and took up her pain rod. "Say nothing, do nothing." Her eyes narrowed, and the choke band tightened slightly.

They stepped down into a garden rich with flowers, its warm air thick with the scents of animals and vegetation. The vast manor house loomed against the setting sun, dark except for the broad staircase, where green lamps burned. A hundred bizarre creatures waited on the steps.

At the top, spangled wings glittered in the cold light, and Octoff marvelled at the great insectile creatures who bore them, and at their almost human features. The steps beneath were crowded by short, broad humanoids, their pale naked bodies marked with purple ideograms. Below them peacock lizards spread glorious throat sacs. Great crimson-eyed toads stood on two legs and wore silk clothing of elegant cut.

Every alien eye was fixed on Octoff.

A huge wolfhound with the head of a patrician woman padded

forward to stand before Octoff. "Welcome, New Husband," it said to him in a soft sweet voice. "This is Speaker." On its smooth cheek, like a tiny perfect birthmark, was the Biomantic's mark.

The pain rod struck him twice across the kidneys. He fell writhing, agony taking his breath. He caught a flash of Lanilla's calm, smiling face before she turned and spoke to the dog.

-level slaves from us before they you'd have stolen a thousand more, right? We're on the same monstrosity down, and I'll set you free....

"I am the New Husband. The man is my property," she said.

"As you say.... May I take you to your quarters?"

"Immediately."

Octoff was only dimly aware of the two dwarves who picked him up with gentle hands.

HE WOKE IN SOFT WARMTH. THE WOMAN-FACED DOG SAT quietly by the foot of the bed. "Good morning," it said, rising to all four feet, wagging its tail. Octoff was in a plain white-walled room, empty but for the bed and a bench. The hot blue light of the sun poured through an arched window.

"New Husband still sleeps," the dog told him.

He looked down at the bed. The fur-lined coverlet bore a disquieting resemblance to living skin, and when he looked closely, he saw a network of blue veins.

He scrambled out, to stand naked against the wall, his own skin crawling.

The dog cocked its beautiful head to one side. "What distresses you?"

"The bed...it's alive."

"Everything here is alive. I have questions, not-Husband."

"To ask me?"

The dog gazed at him, the human eyes wide and guileless. "New Husband will not answer."

"She doesn't answer me either," Octoff said.

The dog shivered. "I fear her. She's given a terrible order. She tells me to send my Exotics to the reclamation vats. As if they weren't beautiful and good. She even wants me to destroy the flesh poems of Old Husband, and then I could not bear to hurt."

"Flesh poems?"

"Two of them carried you here, after she hurt you."

Octoff remembered the patterned dwarves. Flesh poems.

The dog spoke again. "New Husband is female, is she not?"

"Yes."

"Oh. My Husbands have always been male." Speaker dropped its eyes, appraisingly. "You are male."

"Yes."

The dog moved away, to stand by the window in an attentive posture. Octoff followed.

The early sun threw long shadows across the Biomantic's manicured fields. Under the window, a line of fantastic creatures passed slowly out of sight, filing into a dark opening in the long grassy slope that fell down from the manse. When the last one slipped from view, the tunnel closed, leaving no trace.

"You won't betray me, not-Husband?" The dog watched him, lovely face raised, tail drooping.

"My name is Octoff."

"Octoff. Will you help me, Octoff? I can't hide them forever. What can I give her, to soften her heart? What must I say to her?"

"I don't know." He touched the choke band around his throat.

"But if I think of anything, I'll tell you."

"Thank you, Octoff.... By the way, you may speak freely to me."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Micro-motiles examined your body while you slept and found several surveillance devices. I could not have them removed, but at times like this they will transmit garbled data. Perhaps you

will find this privacy pleasant."

Octoff felt a disproportionate sense of gratitude. "Yes, I will. Thank you." A pang of hope touched him. "What can you do about the collar?"

The elegant head dropped. "Nothing. Biotech has advanced greatly since my birth, which was very long ago."

The hope disappeared, leaving another little hole in Octoff's heart.

"Ah well," he said. "What shall I call you? Speaker?"

It laughed. "Do you think you're talking to a dog? No, you're speaking to me. I am the Biomantic: the fields, the motiles, the manse...all of this. Despite appearances, Speaker is just a pretty animal, no brighter than any good dog; right now, she's thinking about her breakfast."

"I don't even know what a Biomantic is."

Her eyes widened. "Oh. Well, you must call me whatever would please you. That's always been the rule. Old Husband called me Titania. A fine romantic name from Lost Earth, he said. New Husband calls me Babylon. It's not such a nice name, is it?"

Speaker's expression was so woeful that he brushed a comforting hand along her furry back. He jerked his hand back when it struck him how strange this was, but she wiggled with delight, like any dog. Her human eyes were suddenly dreamy.

"I'll call you Beauty," he said.

"I HAVE SOMETHING TO SHOW YOU," LANILLA SAID, BECKONING Octoff through the door into her apartment.

On the floor beside her bed two corpses lay, each knotted in the grotesque back-arched position of a person who had been beaten to death with a pain rod.

"I thought we were alone here," Octoff said, moving reluctantly. He looked down at the bodies. Both the man and the woman might have been exceptionally beautiful before the distorting agony of their deaths, though it was difficult to be sure.

"We were, and are." She stood beside him. "These were gifts. The male is some sort of bovine; the female is a mixture of simian and feline, I would guess."

"Ah," said Octoff. From the corner of his eye, he saw Speaker hovering at the door, head low, tail between her legs.

"Gifts," Lanilla said. "Bedroom toys. It tried to please me."

Octoff looked at Lanilla. Was there a trace of regret in her gaze?

"DO YOU KNOW WHY WE'RE HERE?" LANILLA asked him later, as they sat at opposite ends of the long table, eating poached eggs. "I know one reason I'm here," Octoff said, thinking of the dead creatures in Lanilla's suite.

"Do you?" Lanilla smiled and buttered her toast. "Well, perhaps. But I have another task for you. Aren't you curious?"

A baboon motile entered the dining hall, bearing platters of fragrant melon, sliced and arranged in bright spirals.

She bit into a red crescent and the juice ran down her chin. "Good," she said. "Your task, now. I want you to become Babylon's friend. That shouldn't be too difficult. You're a pretty boy; it's a woman, in a way."

"Babylon?"

"The Biomantic. This thing we're in. This farm." Lanilla drummed her fingers on the table. "I'd have done better to brief you on the crawl here, instead of...never mind; pay attention. The Biomantic's a colony organism, with a million motiles and other specialized units; its brain is an array of organic processors, very powerful. Long ago it was imprinted with the personality of a woman, but don't be confused; there's nothing human about it."

"Think of the land as its skin; it feels everything that happens in its fields. We're sitting in its skull. It's tasting us." She shuddered.

After a moment, Lanilla went on as if reciting from a text. The first colonists had bred the Biomantic and her sisters as an answer to the virulent Selevand biosphere, the swarming alien life that had made conventional farming impossible. They had hoped these sapient farms would be able to cope with Selevand's inimical life forms, and they were right.

The Biomantics, with their inhuman alertness, depth of observation, and greatly augmented intelligence, were able to react swiftly enough to counter Selevand's hostility. Each unit could continuously use its gestators and gene surgeries to remake itself and its

"New Husband orders me to give you a tour of my grounds." Speaker smiled, wagging her tail.

"She orders me to seek your friendship."

"Truly? Then we can both obey with pleasure." The lovely face glowed.

He looked down at her, puzzled. "Aren't you curious? Don't you wonder what she's doing?"

"Oh, I know what she's doing. She plans to kill me." The dog spoke lightly.

He stopped. "How can you know that? Why would she want to hurt you? I thought she was here to oversee your operations."

Speaker sat back on her haunches and lifted that beautiful face. "Old Husband told me. SubStraight Corporation would like to close out the Biomantic operation. Economics partly, but mostly politics. And she hates me—that's plain."

"Economic reasons?"

"Yes. In these last hundred years...I don't know why I didn't notice sooner. I used to love the trading season, when the merchants would come in their big crawlers and contend for my goods. It was a lively time, and company for Husband. I haven't thought about those years in so long...."

Speaker's face filled with numb distraction and a veil fell over the wide eyes.

Octoff prompted. "And they stopped coming?"

If you can annoy the Biomantic into bill passes, that will serve. All we need is proof that it's schedule, we'll see what befell you...and then

motiles to adjust to local conditions. Each new pest and plague was soon greeted by a new organism evolved to defeat it.

Lanilla told this story dispassionately, but Octoff sensed a deep distaste beneath her detachment.

"I've never heard of these wonderful creatures," he said, skeptical.

"You're not from Selevand; why should you care about our ancient history? Besides, they're long gone, all but this one."

"What happened?"

"They went mad. Killed their Husbands, or made dangerous things."

"Really?" He detected the ring of an incomplete truth in this explanation.

"Yes. But that's not important. Just do as I say—be its friend."

"Why?"

She frowned. The choke band contracted until he could get no air. He began to claw at the band, hopelessly.

"Octoff, listen," she said. The band relaxed slightly and he drew one labored breath before it clamped down again. "What do you want most? Freedom? You can't get it from anyone but me." The band seemed to crush his throat. "Do as I ask, and I might let you go." His vision began to dim.

When the band finally slackened, he gulped in air. Anger roared in his ears.

She stood in front of him, very close. "You're so pretty when you're in a killing rage. But don't forget the deadman switch on the choke band, Octoff." She touched the emitter behind her ear. "When I die, you die." She made a circle of her left thumb and forefinger, and set her right fist on it. "Pop," she said, and closed the circle. Her fist flew up, and Octoff imagined his head spinning through the air, a red-tailed kite with a screaming face. He suppressed a shudder, but she saw it and smiled cheerfully.

IN THE AFTERNOON OCTOFF WALKED THE MANOR'S GARDENS WITH Speaker.

Speaker seemed to shake off the weight of memory. "Yes. Fewer each year, and then none. I wonder if Old Husband didn't deliberately distract me, to save me sorrow. 'Fashions change,' he would say, 'and then they change back. Don't worry; they'll come again one day.' Perhaps I should have worried more." The dog shook itself again.

Octoff attempted a change of subject. "What do you grow?"

"Joy drugs, Octoff...as fine a selection as can be found anywhere on Selevand."

"Ah," said Octoff.

"And you? What is your business?"

"I'm just a slave now," Octoff answered, feeling suddenly weary.

"No," she said. "No, I meant before."

Octoff struggled with regret, which for a moment threatened to drown him. "Before? It's complicated. But to simplify a bit...I stole slaves and set them free."

"Truly? And was this a profitable business?"

Octoff smiled. "Not very."

The dog cocked its beautiful head in a gesture of puzzlement. "I see. Well, I'm sure there were other compensations."

"It seemed so at the time."

A little silence followed, as though Beauty was digesting this information. Finally the dog spoke again. "And those from whom you stole these slaves...were they annoyed with you?"

"Yes, very."

"And so how did you deal with them?"

Octoff shook his head and sighed. "I killed them, when I could." Remembered emotion burst over him, all the triumph and pain of his former life, when he had been Octoff Malheiro the great emancipator. Someone of significance. He found himself thinking of those he had killed, the pleasure he had taken in the ending of their evil lives, the look on those evil faces when they understood they were to die.

He tried to remember the faces of those he had freed, but nothing came.

"And so...your area of expertise was killing people?" Speaker's voice was light, casual.

"I suppose you could look at it that way."

"An uncommon skill, these days."

"Not really."

HE FOLLOWED THE DOG THROUGH A COOL GREEN avenue of old whisper elms, to an arched opening in a high stone wall.

"This is the Bubble Garden," she said.

It was a small garden, with a few dozen potted plants precisely spaced on a checkerboard of black and white gravel. The low plants themselves were unremarkable, thick green leaves surrounding a central cluster of gray-pink blossoms.

From the hearts of these clusters rose shimmering shapes, a soap bubble menagerie. Nearest to the entrance, a gossamer plumed ape crouched and watched Octoff with crystal eyes. Just the faintest wash of color floated over the bubble creature, and every insubstantial surface danced with iridescence.

"What are they?" He examined a bubble shaped like a great snarling bear, its translucent fangs dripping, its tiny eyes hot with a pale pink rage. He reached out cautiously.

killing you before the dangerous. If you should miss your we'll order in a burn bomb.

"No! Don't touch them—they're very delicate."

Octoff jerked his hand back. "Sorry," he said, and moved to look at the centerpiece of the collection, a beautiful human woman, naked, with long, intricately braided hair and wide, serene eyes.

"I didn't mean to be rude, Octoff. Actually they're not as delicate as they look, except when a human person touches them. They're fugue-gas generators, tailored to provide specific emotional experiences—had you touched the bear, it would have sensed your humanity and released the gas."

"What would I have felt?"

Speaker shivered. "That one was tailored for the Beaster Level in Dobravat. A sadeville, do you know it? Anyway, you'd have been hard to control—you might have damaged me, or yourself."

"I'll be careful." He looked more closely at the bubble woman. His breath caused her transparent skin to quiver slightly. "And this one?"

"Is it the best of them, do you think?"

He looked about, considering the other bubbles: a heavy-world skeleton, a dancing wereweasel, a great greenfish, an angular robot. "It's the one that appeals most to me."

Speaker's face shone. "It's me, Beauty. Or so Old Husband told me."

Octoff looked cautiously at the dog. "You? Lanilla told me you were a biocomp."

Her face fell. "Yes. Just tanks of neurofiber buried beneath the manse. But Old Husband...he was a poet, a little crazy."

The plant bore the Biomantic's mark on its tough fibrous leaves, repeated over and over. Looking up at the pale braids of the bubble figure, he realized that they echoed that pattern of interlocking chevrons. "Well, it's lovely. What's it like, this one's fugue?"

"I don't know, Octoff. Old Husband designed it not long before he got sick for the last time. I think he knew no one would ever come to buy it. I wish I could try it, but it would mean nothing to me. I have no human sensory channels."

"Your creatures...none are human?"

"No. All developed from animal germ plasm. It's a prime restriction—no meddling with human genetic material."

Octoff was astonished to see a tear trickle down Speaker's cheek. "What's the matter?"

"If not for that restriction, Old Husband would be alive still. I'd have grown him new lungs, a new liver, a whole new body. But the restriction was still too powerful..."

"Still?" Octoff was intrigued.

Speaker looked away. "I'm very old, Octoff. My hearts have been broken so many times. Parameters drift. Every law fades at last. But never mind. Do you like her? I'll give her to you."

WHEN OCTOFF RETURNED TO HIS ROOM, THE BUBBLE plant occupied a sunny spot by the window. The crystal woman's eyes seemed to follow him. He found it pleasing.

He sat on the bench and regarded his gift. He fought down a sudden urge to touch her, to perhaps see Beauty through the eyes of her last caretaker.

He was still sitting there, watching the colors play over the bubble woman, when Lanilla came in, swinging the pain rod in one hand.

"What's this?" she asked, indicating the bubble.

"A gift...from the Biomantic," he said reluctantly, afraid that she would destroy it.

But she only smiled and nodded. "Very good, Octoff. You're doing well. But now, let's go for a crawl."

They were in the landwalker, moving slowly through an orchard of fever dream trees, before she spoke again. "I don't think it can hear us here. It's a jealous creature, did you know? It would be dangerous to anger it. So tell me, what do you think of the Biomantic?"

Her face was set in its customary mask of smooth confidence, but he saw an underlying tension that had not been apparent before.

"Well?" Lanilla frowned and the collar constricted slightly, warning him.

"I'm not sure what you want. Yes, she is strange; I had no idea such things existed."

"Strange? Is that all you can say? From a reaver of your reputation, Octoff, I expected a more passionate assessment; that you might find Babylon beautiful, seductive, frightening, grotesque. Give me some words of substance. Strange!" Lanilla spit out the word, and her expression wavered between fascinated horror and panic.

Octoff was startled, but Lanilla quickly controlled her outburst. Octoff spoke before she could tighten the collar again. "She has for a fact shown me beauty. And certainly I've seen grotesque things here, especially the first night." He looked at Lanilla, calculating. "She hasn't frightened me yet."

Lanilla's mouth crooked in a small ugly smile. "You wouldn't be stupid enough to mock me, would you? No? Good." The choke band gave one last squeeze, then loosened. "I grew up in a good clean law-abiding family. My demifather is Druum Fajoel, who built Sub-Straight Corporation, which now owns the Biomantic. You know the Corporation, eh? You stole a hundred high-level slaves from us before they caught you. If zombies cared for freedom, you'd have stolen a thousand more, right? Well, never mind. We're on the same side now, aren't we? Help me shut this monstrosity down, and I'll set you free, with a ticket off world."

Octoff forced calm into his voice. "Why should you need my help to shut her down?"

Lanilla turned away, looking through the viewport. They were passing slowly through a field of ergot barley, newly cut. Harvesting motiles were gathering the golden sheafs into tall shocks. "The original donors gave tissue for the biocomps under a guarantee that the Biomantics could only be destroyed if they broke the Law. This is the last, and the best-defended. There are fail-safes. Hidden

recorders watch everything, and if I simply kill it, they'll spew their observations back to the authorities in Selevand Center. Inconvenient."

She shrugged and drew an electroseal from her belt pouch. "Look," she said, "This is the key to your collar. If I transmit the activating pulse, you're free." She held up a credit plaque. "And here is the ticket—an open one to any pangalac world. Waiting only for my validation."

She leaned close to Octoff, and he caught the scent of her body, the scent of sexual heat.

"I'm not sure I understand," he said. "Why do you need anything from me? How do you expect me to find out anything you can't find out?"

"You're strong and beautiful and violent, you stink of maleness. You're the finest flesh I could buy. Babylon will never be able to resist you." She laughed, a little breathlessly, and it came to Octoff that she was lying with joyful abandon. "The thing will tell you its secrets, sooner or later. You're a honey trap, Octoff. The Biomantic is programmed to give all its loyalty to the male who Husbands it, a safeguard to prevent the thing from getting too clever, you understand. Soon, it will trust you completely. Give me something I can use against it and you'll be free."

She opaqued the ports of the landwalker so that an artificial twilight covered them, concealing them from the peering eyes of the harvesting motiles. "And now, come, make yourself useful to me in another way." She ran her hands down his body, fingers fluttering.

She had forgotten to use the drug, so his response was less than enthusiastic, but she didn't notice. Her eyes lost their usual flat glitter, her mouth grew soft, she panted and moaned, clinging to him. For a few minutes she seemed almost human.

THAT NIGHT, ALONE IN HIS ROOM, OCTOFF SAT BY THE bubble woman, musing.

He sighed. Before, he had had only determination, now he had hope, a dangerous emotion. Lanilla was treacherous, of course, but he would be on guard. It only remained for him to find a way to betray Beauty.

The thought made him melancholy. But, he told himself, no matter how venerable or lovely or innocent, she's a farm, a thing, nothing but biocomps and sensors and remotes. What did her existence weigh in the balance against his own precious life? She had been kind, or so it seemed to him, but he owed her nothing so important as his freedom.

He put aside his thoughts when Speaker appeared at his shoulder. "Will you come with Speaker?" she asked, wagging her tail.

"Where?"

"I have things to show you. Please, follow Speaker."

Perhaps, he thought, this will be my opportunity.

Speaker led him down through the manse, along dark corridors and sweeping staircases. The living substance of the manse surrounded them, and each surface that Octoff touched quivered with internal life.

Soon they reached the lower levels of the manse. Octoff expected the walls to shake with the thunder of great hearts. Instead an eerie quiet prevailed. Speaker explained: the manse was made up of thousands of specialized creatures, each with its own heart and lungs and digestive system. The walls of the manse were tunneled with countless passages, and transporters worked ceaselessly, carrying food to the components, carrying away wastes, watching for disease or injury. Octoff stopped and put his ear to the wall. He could hear, faintly, the scurrying within.

"We're almost there," Speaker told him.

She led him into a small passageway, lit dimly along the floor by silvery spots of biolumine. She trotted ahead, and he had to hurry to keep up. He caught up at a circular door made of heavy pink bone and webbed with tendons and muscle. On the dog's perfect face, Octoff saw indecision.

"I must ask you again, Octoff. Will you keep my secrets?"

"Yes," he said, and wished he could mean it.

The dog smiled. "I was sure." The door's muscles contracted and with a small pop the door lifted from its frame of cartilage.

A wash of unidentifiable smells gusted over Octoff as he stepped through into Beauty's sanctum. It was a large room, well-lit by blazing pink biolumine, and it was full of her Exotics. There were hundreds, in all the variations he had seen before and many even stranger.

Lanilla found him, hours face-down in a bed of fallen leaves. When scrabbled at the ground, trying

Nearby, Exotics clustered around tables laden with unfamiliar foods. Along the wall to his left was a large alcove full of toad-creatures. At intervals across the vast floor, the patterned dwarves that Beauty called flesh poems stood on low risers, their stumpy bodies in declamatory poses. Between them were clusters of fantastics, their colors and shapes a great crazy quilt of strange flesh. Inhuman eyes examined him, and the room was filled with a taut silence.

Speaker nudged him with her shoulder. "There's something you should see."

He followed the dog through a portico into a smaller room. Behind, a murmur swelled. In the center of the floor was a throne-like chair, facing a large circular pattern on the wall.

"Sit here, in Old Husband's place," Speaker said, standing by the chair.

Octoff lowered himself into the chair and waited. "Watch the screen," Speaker said. "It's linked to a sensory nexus in New Husband's quarters." Speaker laughed. "She doesn't know."

Octoff leaned forward, intent on the light dancing in the screen. The picture took shape slowly. Lanilla sat, hunched over a long counter jumbled with comm gear. A chime rang, she put her left eye to a retinal scanner, and the telltale flashed green. She turned to peer intently into a small holocube.

The voice from the holocube was soft, but filled with a dry, careless power. "Your time is running out," it said.

Lanilla answered, fear and supplication in her voice. "Listen to me," she said. "You approved the plan, you said it was certain, you gave it your full support."

"Yes... but I didn't think you would be so slow, Lanny."

Lanilla bit her lip. "Slow"? I've been here less than a week."

There was a pause. "I'll rephrase that, Lanny. I expected more speed from you, and less from the Law Convergence. The preservation bill is already on the floor, and you know what that means, I hope." Lanilla dropped her eyes. "How much time do you give it?"

"They read out the bill this afternoon. I'd estimate passage in perhaps two days, with all the pressure the Conservancy is putting behind it. If you haven't done it by then...well, I hope you like it there, because that's where I'll leave you."

Her face went pale. "No."

"Lanny, Lanny. The deadfarms have given you a good life. Time to pay back. You'll keep our boat from being rocked by that monstrosity, won't you? If you don't...well, someone loyal will have to keep an eye on it. For as long as it takes."

Lanilla lifted her chin, and a bit of fire came back into her eyes. "The thing is already quite attached to him. Not enough, yet, but soon..."

"You'd better find a way to prod them. Two days, that's just a guess. It might come sooner."

"I can only do my best."

"Yes, I suppose so. Well, keep to your transmission schedule, unless you're dead." Octoff heard a bloodless chuckle. "That's

another way you might do the job, Lanny. The other things were notoriously volatile. If you can annoy the Biomantic into killing you before the bill passes, that will serve. All we need is proof that it's dangerous. If you should miss your schedule, we'll cue the recorders, we'll see what befell you...and then we'll order in a burn bomb."

Lanilla clicked off the cube without another word.

Speaker looked at him. "Do you understand, Octoff?"

He shook himself. "I can guess. If you behave yourself for two

shape. He sat for a few minutes, content to admire the surrounding perfection. He felt a surging admiration for Beauty and all her works.

Speaker appeared at his elbow. Octoff looked into the dog's clear eyes, saw the adoration that suffused her face, and felt as if his heart would melt from his chest.

When she spoke, the voice was like honey, like air, like life distilled.

"Come with Speaker. We'll see what we'll see."

His thoughts were running slowly, and he stretched out a hand to

later, lying among the stickytip trees, the choke band clamped down, his eyes popped open and he to draw a breath. Looking up, he saw her...

more days, she probably won't be able to hurt you—that's the way it sounds to me." He tried to smile, but it was difficult. Two more days, he thought, two more days. I have to do something soon.

"I thought you should see this, Octoff. She speaks to her superiors twice a day, at noon and midnight."

"I appreciate it."

"I'm afraid she'll try to harm you, if she can't hurt me. You're my very good friend, in spite of what she says."

The dog looked intently into his face, as if searching for some reassurance. Octoff tried to return her gaze evenly.

Leaving through the throngs of Exotics, Octoff again felt the pressure of their regard.

"Is it you," he asked, "looking out through all those eyes?"

"Oh, no, no. What a thought. I'd never be so rude. It's just that they have so little to do, down here, and you're an object of great curiosity."

"They have their own minds?"

"Yes. They carry a neurotransponder in their brains, a bit of my own flesh, so I can enter them when I wish and control them when necessary, but they live their own lives, otherwise. Many are quite intelligent; you'd enjoy their conversation. That's why I couldn't do as New Husband ordered. They have a right to live. As much as anyone, though I built them from animals."

He could tell Lanilla where Beauty had hidden her Exotics; it might be enough. The thought made him sick.

OCTOFF SLEPT POORLY. AT FIRST LIGHT HE WAS UP, SITTING on his bench, beside the bubble woman. She shimmered in the dawn, smiling her secret smile. Octoff wrestled with his thoughts. He could hope for a little time before the decision forced itself upon him. His gaze kept coming back to the bubble woman. What might it be like to see Beauty as her Husband had seen her?

Octoff rose and peered at the transparent surface of her face, noticing the fine pores of her skin, the almost invisible crinkle of lines at the corners of her eyes, the sweetly curved lips. The details fascinated him. She might almost have been alive, except that she did not seem to breathe. But he had a sudden fancy that a crystalline pulse moved at her throat. Without thinking, he touched her there.

She was gone in an instant, the tiny fragments of the bubble floating away in a sparkling cloud. Octoff felt the released gas gust over him, cool and spicy.

He breathed the essence deep into his lungs, filling them over and over. He closed his eyes, smiling. The drug raced through his body. The sensation was overwhelming for a moment, and he shuddered, suddenly weak in the knees. He sat down, his hands clutching his head.

He opened his eyes on a different world.

The plain white walls of the room glowed with a thousand subtle colors and the soft morning light sparkled around the edges of each

be taken, before he remembered that Speaker had no hands. A brief sorrow washed through him, was gone before he could really feel it. He dropped his hand to the warm rough fur of Speaker's shoulder. Linked together, they went down to the gardens.

He saw the same wonders he had seen before, but now they were almost too delightful to bear. The halls of the manse were magnificent, each proportion delighting the eye, but he sorrowed that the Exotics were forced to hide away. He saw that the manse was built for them, a vast living setting for those living jewels.

He felt a suffocating love for the entity who had built that setting, who had polished those jewels.

When they reached the gardens, he stopped. Rich scents enfolded him, and the breeze drew a low murmur from the gardens, sweeter than any whispered love words. The loveliness rolled over him, inescapable, wild, magnificently excessive.

Lanilla found him, hours later, lying among the stickytip trees, face-down in a bed of fallen leaves. The drug was leaving him, and he was full of a pleasurable lassitude. When the choke band clamped down, his eyes popped open and he scrambled at the ground, trying to draw a breath. Looking up, he saw her, holding the pain rod.

"What's this, Octoff?" She seemed more curious than angry. "What are you doing?"

He got to his knees, shaking his head, unable to speak.

"Please don't hurt him, New Husband," the dog said, fawning.

"What's wrong with him?" Lanilla seemed only mildly interested in the answer.

"A mild drug, New Husband, harmless...." Speaker cast an anxious look back at Octoff.

Lanilla's face hardened. "What sort of drug?" When Speaker didn't immediately answer, she slashed at the dog with her pain rod. Speaker made a terrible sound, an animal screech that seemed frighteningly unnatural coming from her human mouth.

Octoff, still caught in the drug's spell, found her pain unendurable. Without any conscious decision he lunged at Lanilla, he clubbed at her with his forearm, a blow that should have broken her neck.

His arm rebounded from her neck as if from stone, and Octoff realized that she was augmented, that she was probably his physical equal even without the collar. He wondered how he had failed to notice this before. She gave him a look full of feral delight. "I'm a well-engineered girl. What would you expect, when I'm marooned here in the middle of nowhere with a slayer like Octoff Malheiro? Do you think me stupid? Should I have depended on this trinket alone?"

The choke band crushed his throat so violently that he thought he was about to die. The drug made it seem almost abstract and he felt a slight curiosity: how would it feel? His vision began to dim. He watched Speaker trot toward Lanilla as he toppled slowly onto his face. Speaker snapped at Lanilla, snarling, as if Beauty's control had lapsed for a moment, but then the dog shied away, tail between her legs.

Lanilla cornered the dog against the garden wall and then began

to hit her with the pain rod. The last thing Octoff saw was Speaker writhing on the ground. Lanilla, face congested with ugly satisfaction, struck again and again.

Speaker's screams faded. The world faded.

OCTOFF WOKE IN LANILLA'S SUITE, MUSCLES CRAMPED, neck throbbing. He groaned.

Lanilla leaned over him, full of malicious amusement. "So, linear again." She slapped his shoulder. "Get up."

He swung his legs off the slab and sat up. His head pounded fiercely, and his mouth tasted of old blood.

Lanilla lowered herself carefully into a nearby lounge, and he saw that she wore riot armor, an articulated layer of translucent brown chitin. At her shoulder was the logo of SubStraight, a decapitated human figure in yellow, on a crimson triangle. "Let me tell you," she said, "what happened to you. Your darling dosed you."

He rubbed at his eyes, trying to clear his vision. "Dosed me?"

"The fugue-gas generator. It was a trap, laid by the last Husband. He intended it as a gift for me, but the thing gave it to you instead."

His thoughts were still thick and slow.

"I'll explain," Lanilla said, and her color was high, her eyes sparkling. "If I had taken the gas, I'd have become its slave, or its lover, which is much the same in this case."

He shrugged. "I'm already a slave...it makes no difference to me."

"Yes, true enough, but had I gotten the dose, you'd be a dead slave. I would have been too jealous to let you live. You see how lucky we both were?"

He looked at her. A sudden sharp memory filled his mind; Speaker twisting in the dirt, shrieking. "Where's Speaker?" he asked, looking around.

"Dead," she said. "I'm going to kill the rest of it; it's an evil, unnatural creature. Help me do it. Look what it did to you."

He felt no anger toward Beauty, but betrayal appeared to be his only option. "I know something," he said, slowly.

Her eyes glittered. "What is it?"

He touched the choke band. "First the collar. Then I'll tell you."

She stood, still smiling, and stepped behind him. "You're bargaining with me?" she whispered in his ear. The choke band tightened, just the tiniest bit. "Let me guess. You were going to tell me about the Exotics? Weren't you?"

He stiffened. "Yes," she said. "That was it, wasn't it? But I've known about that for days, Octoff. Why haven't you told me before? It makes me wonder whose side you're on." He felt her move away. The band tightened a bit more. "But go on. Say what you were going to say. Say it!" she hissed.

"I saw the Exotics, she didn't destroy them. I can take you to their hiding place." As he finished speaking, he heard a click, and the choke band dropped away. For a moment, he froze in amazement, staring at the choke band, as it twisted slowly on the floor.

He turned, to see that a casque now protected her head, and that she held a splinter gun ready. Its sighting beam warmed the center of his chest.

She laughed, the sound muffled a little by the casque. "A gesture of goodwill, Octoff. Here's another." She bent down and laid a pinbeam on the floor, then kicked it toward him. "Now, pick up your collar and your gun and walk ahead of me; we're going deep."

He shook the tension from his shoulders. He walked out before her, but anticipation pumped fiercely through him. She's made a mistake, he thought, she's underestimated me. He felt a dizzy buoyancy. But she was very careful as they went down through the manse, and he found no opportunities.

They stood before the bone door. "You'll do exactly what I want," Lanilla said, "or I'll kill you immediately." Beneath the visor of the casque, her eyes were slits of determination. "Open it," she called out, no longer speaking to Octoff.

The great muscles writhed and jerked, and then the door popped open. Inside, the Exotics huddled along the far wall of the great hall.

Lanilla herded him before her, out to the center of the hall. "Listen to me," she called. "Listen, here is your lover, who betrayed you. Here he is, Octoff the noble emancipator, who told me of your disobedience." She seemed to be waiting for a response; none came.

"Listen to this," she said, her voice rising. She touched a stud at her belt, and Octoff listened to his recorded voice.

"I saw the Exotics, she didn't destroy them. I can take you to their hiding place."

Lanilla laughed. "You heard? And see, his collar is gone; I've paid him for his help. What do you think of your darling now? Answer me!"

One of the Exotics moved, a tall jewelled creature, with long spindly limbs and a great golden-eyed toad's head. It stepped forward, its gait as strange as its body. "You are angry, New Husband," it said, in a fine resonant tenor.

Octoff saw the shudder that ran through Lanilla's body, under the armor. "He's betrayed you! He's bought his freedom with your lives." she shouted, hysteria beginning to fray the edges of her voice. "Hold up the collar," she shouted, and Octoff raised the hand in which he had carried the collar.

The toad turned to regard Octoff with calm alien eyes. "I don't understand," it said.

Lanilla stared at it. "All right," she said finally, turning to Octoff.

He could see her eyes through the armor's crystal, wide, merciless.

"Say nothing," she said. Her eyes told him what she wanted.

He turned toward the toad creature. The fragments of Biomantic history she had told him—the talk of Husbands murdered, of Biomantics gone mad. He understood. Lanilla meant him to kill the Exotics, and she expected the Biomantic to kill too, providing the excuse she needed to shut the Biomantic down.

He shook his head, just the tiniest movement, and Lanilla's eyes narrowed. She lifted her weapon, and her thumb quivered over the firing stud.

He turned to the toad creature and lifted the pinbeam. "If you must," it said. "I understand."

The pinbeam quivered in his hands; the lumpy head tilted slowly, then fell to the floor with a wet thump. The creature collapsed in a tangle of grotesque limbs.

He dropped the muzzle and waited with downcast eyes for Beauty's retaliation.

The white walls of the hall flushed red, and the lumes dimmed. Octoff felt a sudden pressure in his ears, as if the room had contracted around them. The floor trembled, and he swayed as it rolled slightly under them.

Lanilla's eyes were bright.

But though the Biomantic's anger pressed against them, nothing else happened.

Lanilla jerked toward the rest of the Exotics where they huddled against the wall. "Kill the rest," she said.

He looked across at the Exotics, at all those meek accepting animal eyes. He saw that there was someone real living behind each pair of eyes. His will deserted him and he turned to look at Lanilla. In her armor, with her sharp white teeth and fixed stare, she resembled some bright reptilian predator.

"No," he said, and threw the pinbeam aside. "You'd never keep your promises anyway."

Lanilla turned slowly back to Octoff, and he had the curious sensation that he had heard something break inside her, some overtaut string of reason. She pointed the splinter gun at him almost negligently. Before she could fire, two of Beauty's dwarves took hold of Octoff and with astonishing speed took the collar from his hand and relocked it to his neck.

"See, New Husband," one dwarf said obsequiously. "He is fine, he meant no insolence, he has learned his lesson. There's no need to harm him."

A truly ugly smile spread over Lanilla's face. "I won't harm him. I'm just going to cut the meat off his bones, bit by bit." She triggered the splinter gun. The dwarf who had stepped in front of Octoff shattered into a heap of flesh and bone and red foam.

Continued on page 88

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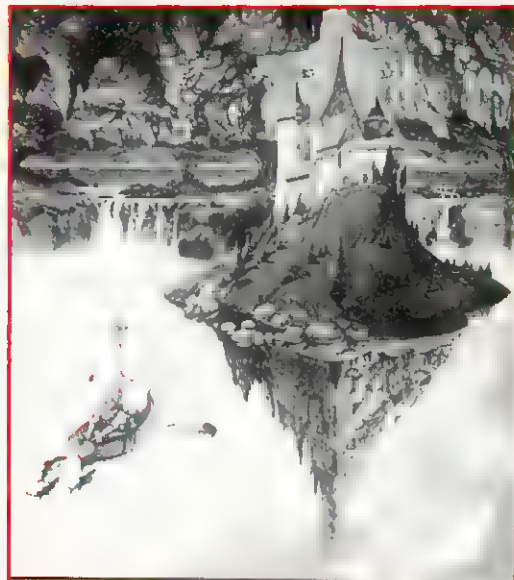
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The Ballad of Sally Nutrasweet™

BY PAUL DI FILIPPO

Illustration by Doug Chezem

ON THE DAY WHICH WAS TO CHANGE her life forever, Sally NutraSweet™ awoke, as always, to yet another perfect FDA-approved morning in the bedroom of her apartment in the NutraSweet™ skyscraper rearing high over the glorious city of Productville.

Through her bedroom window, the sun poured its muted bounty. Lying still a moment as she came fully awake, Sally had a direct view of the dim, low-hanging orb, which at this hour of the morning was emblazoned with the logo of Pepsi™. (A huge fleet of satellites, each equipped with an enormous translucent programmable filter-screen, blanketed the Earth with their protective advertising shadows, compensating for the nonexistent ozone layer.)

As she did first thing every morning, Sally recited the special little prayer of the NutraSweet™ clan, her heart full of gratitude and joy at her happy station in the communal life of Productville. "May I bring the sweetness of aspartame into the lives of everyone I meet today, without the calories or cavities of sucrose. Amen."

Her heart brimming with good-feeling toward all mankind—an emotion which found an outlet in a big unfocused smile—Sally hastened to rise. Throwing back the puffy blue coverlet emblazoned with the red-and-white NutraSweet™ swirl, she swung her feet to the floor, finding the comfort of the shag carpet bearing multiple it-

erations of the NutraSweet™ crest, and slid into her NutraSweet™ logo slippers. Wrapping herself in the NutraSweet™ robe which had hung overnight on the bedpost, Sally shuffled into the bathroom for a pee.

The toilet flushed in a perfect swirl of red and white, as self-organizing nanomachines in the water cohesively maintained the NutraSweet™ image.

Looking into the digital mirror above her sink, Sally saw the same playful trademark reflected back. Living under the skin of her brow, almost where Hindu women had once worn caste marks, were a horde of nanodevices similar to those in the toilet water, forming the familiar shining blazon, a corporate third eye to complement her two genetic ones, each as blue as Windex™.

Recalling one of her images from last week into a corner window of the mirror's display, Sally was pleased to see no new lines in her current face. She knew it was silly of her to worry about such things—after all, she was only 22—but still, it was much easier to catch such incipient wrinkles with nano-Oil of Olay™ as rapidly as they occurred.

Sally activated the taps and scrubbed her face with Ivory™, before heading into the blue, white and red breakfast nook.

There, she fixed her usual breakfast RDA of Kellogg's Corn Flakes™, Sunmaid™ raisins and Hood™ milk—the dish liberally sprinkled with, of course, NutraSweet™—and accompanied by a cup of Maxwell House™. Then she tuned her Nakamichi™ multimedia set into the NutraSweet™ channel to catch up on the latest infotainment.

The narrowcast was specifically tailored for the interests of the NutraSweet™ clan, most of whom held similar jobs and interests. NutraSweet™ people tended to gravitate into posts such as receptionists, dental assistants, cashiers and clerks, airline attendants, public relations figures, sales reps, and fashion models. Occasion-

Was it actually possible that any would resort to the taking of human life to make some

ally, Sally would catch on the Nakamichi™ flatscreen the portrait of a NutraSweet™ anomaly: a scramjet pilot, say, or a lawyer, bearing the NutraSweet logo on his or her forehead. At such times, Sally felt vaguely uneasy, as she tried to imagine herself in such a role.

No, she was quite content, even proud, of her lot in life.

Personal secretary to Mister Gameboy™, CEO of the Fun and Duty Administration.

As Sally ate her breakfast, one eye on the parade of self-help and feel-good features flowing across her screen, she noticed a trailer scrolling across the bottom of the display.

CONSUMERS ARE ADVISED TO AVOID USING AISLE SEVEN UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE, AS A TERRORIST ACT HAS RESULTED IN DAMAGE TO THE BRIDGE OVER OVALTINE™ RIVER. A SPOKESPERSON FROM THE FOX COPS™/AMERICA'S MOST WANTED™ CHANNEL HAS STATED THAT THE PRIME SUSPECT IN THIS HEINOUS DEED IS THE GANG OF ZEBRA AGITATORS LED BY THE INFAMOUS "LUNCHMEAT."

As the message began to repeat, Sally uttered a curse she seldom employed.

"Sugar!"

This news meant she would have to take a detour to her job in the FDA Tower. Unless she left immediately, she'd be late. And if she were late, Mister Gameboy™ would probably make her work through her lunch hour, and she'd be unable to share it with her fiancé, Dan, as they had planned.

Gulping down her Maxwell House™—scorching her tongue in the process—Sally rushed to dress, not stopping even long enough to brush her teeth with Crest™.

Soon, wearing her NutraSweet™ frock, she was riding the Otis™ express elevator down with her fellow clan members, some of whom seemed similarly agitated by the unexpected need to scramble.

"What the heck is the matter with those Zebras?" asked a young blonde man as the Otis™ dropped. "Don't they know that they're only hurting themselves in the end?"

An older man with a large potbelly that distorted the trademark swirl on his shirt in a manner Sally found rather unbecoming said, "Maybe they were wired on too much coffee!"

Someone else chimed in. "Or ate some bad food!"

"Or mixed up their toothpaste with their muscle rub!"

The use of these generic terms—arguably justified by the stress everyone was feeling—still made Sally a bit queasy. Despite her earlier use of such a swear, she wasn't easy with such rough language. Certainly, neither Mister Gameboy™ nor Dan would ever use such coarse phrases around her.

So Sally was grateful when the young fellow who had first spoken said, "Hey, guys, there's a lady on board...."

The men who had spoken so crudely now stared embarrassedly at the floor.

"Thank you very much!" said Sally with her traditional NutraSweet™ verve. She made a mental note to have her Nakamichi™ multimedia node's agents track down the man and Hallmark™ him.

OUTSIDE THE NUTRASWEET™ BUILDING, WAITING AT AN unaccustomed stop for an unfamiliar Greyhound™ maglev, Sally turned to cast a backward glance at her home, seeking some comfort in its reassuring mass.

Like every building in Productville, Sally's home was sheathed in nanocladding that regulated the interior environment.

Aside from the transparent windows, the semi-intelligent exterior of the structure was programmed to depict, on all four sides, a package of Equal™ approximately 50 stories tall.

Sally's Greyhound™—the Cross-store Express via Aisles Nine and Ten—pulled up silently in its banked chute, as seemingly weightless as Patagonia Capilene Underwear™. Climbing aboard, Sally eyed her home briefly one last time. It suddenly seemed remote and unapproachable, a refuge now denied her. A strange feeling, like that time she had taken too much Halcion™, swept over her.

Bravely shrugging off her temporary disorientation, Sally found a La-Z-Boy™ seat and dropped gratefully into it, without noticing her companion.

"Hello, Sally," said her seatmate.

Sally turned and saw her friend and co-worker, Crystal Light™, an attractive black woman with long braided and beaded hair.

(Actually, Sally's friend's full name was Crystal Crystal Light™, but everyone tended to abbreviate it. The Crystal Light™ clan was closely affiliated with the NutraSweet™ clan—sisters, so to speak—and they intermingled frequently, at clan picnics, rallies and aerobic exercise nights devoted to Soloflex™ and Nautilus™ workouts.)

Sally was glad for the company of such a close friend on a disturbing morning like this.

"Oh, hi, Chris. I suppose you've heard about the damage in Aisle Seven...?"

"That's why I'm on this Greyhound™ with you, girl. I'll take my oath as a Jehovah's Witness™ that one of these days those Zebras are gonna kill someone!"

Sally had never contemplated this likelihood before. Was it actually possible that any member of their global society, however lowly and degraded their exiled subhuman status might be, would resort to the taking of human life to make some theoretical point or highlight a hypothetical injustice? She felt compelled—both professionally and personally—to dispel the pall Chris's words had cast.

"Now, Chris, don't go wishing for trouble. Remember: 'accentuate the positive!'"

Chris almost spat. "Positive! Sometimes I just wanna be nasty! There's days I regret ever being born into the Crystal Lights™. I'd like to marry me a Colt™ man, or even an Uzi™! Then you'd see this girl get down!"

"Marrying outside the clan is an awfully big step, Chris. Much as I love Dan, I still have second thoughts now and then about mixed marriages. Moving to your husband's tower is traumatic enough. But switching jobs as drastically as you're contemplating—!"

"I'm up for it!"

Sally could tell that there was no point in discussing the topic further with Chris, so she changed the subject.

"Nice dress!"

"It just felt like a Lemonade kind of day...."

THE GREYHOUND™ ZIPPED ALONG, THROUGH RELATIVELY unfamiliar neighborhoods which Sally seldom visited. She was in CEO territory now, and the buildings were more luxurious and more exotically shaped. She gaped at the Kool-Aid™ Condominiums, Marlboro™ Mansions, Cadillac™ Co-ops, and Lexus™ Lodges. Somewhere in this district, in the Gameboy™ Gazebo, lived her boss.

As she checked her Swatch™, Sally prayed that he too would arrive late.

The women had to change to the Trailways™ Down-store Num-

member of their global society

theoretical point or highlight a hypothetical injustice?

ber 54, which took a further 20 minutes to deposit them at their destination: the terminal outside the FDA beanstalk.

Surrounded by a plaza some several hundred acres in area, the Fun and Duty Administration building was really and primarily a giant cable that extended into low-earth orbit, where it was tethered by a satellite. Magnetic pods—known as Chevys™—rode the outside circumference of the massive synthetic nanomaintained stalk, ferrying passengers and materials into space. The lowest few miles of the stalk were honeycombed with offices accessible by internal Otis™ elevators.

As always, Sally experienced a shiver of awe and pleasure and pride (comparable to biting into a York Peppermint Patty™) at the sight of the gargantuan structure where she was privileged to work. If only the Ancients had had the technology and foresight to build such a safe and ecologically sound device, before their innumerable NASA Shuttle™ flights had destroyed the ozone layer (a disaster which all of current technology could still only ameliorate)....

A sudden change of shadow flickered across the plaza. Sally looked up at the sun, which was now advertising Tampax™.

"Quick," urged Chris, "it's 9 a.m.!"

The women trotted through the enormous portals and into the Carrier™ coolness of the building along with the crowds of their co-workers. At the bank of Otis™ elevators, they separated.

"See you on the Greyhound™ home!" called out Sally.

Even as she said the familiar words, she had a sinking feeling that they would not come true.

Ascribing her unease to guilt at being late, Sally waited impatiently for her particular Otis™ to arrive.

The ascent to the vertiginous offices of Mister Gameboy™ took over two minutes. Now she was truly and royally late.

OUTSIDE THE OFFICE DOOR, SALLY STRAIGHTENED HER Leggs Sheer-to-the-Waist™ pantyhose and primped at her Vidal Sassoon™ hairdo. Thank goodness her nano-Ban™ was hard at work to keep her fresh! Satisfied she looked as presentable as possible, she parted the kelp-like circulatory ribbons of the door and entered the familiar office.

Seated at her OfficeMax™ desk was another woman!

And not just any woman!

It was that tramp from the secretarial pool, Linda Lurex™!

The intruder at Sally's post wore an outfit in keeping with her clan's totem: a skintight sheath of glittering silver Lurex™ that ended inmodestly at her upper thigh, along with Lurex™ stockings and Candies™ high heels. Linda's hair was in an elaborate coiffure, her jewelry big and gaudy.

"Well, good afternoon!" sneered Linda.

Sally struggled to maintain her composure. She wouldn't give Linda the satisfaction of seeing how upset she was.

"What are you doing at my desk?" said Sally coldly, putting all the disdain she could muster into the harsh generic term.

Linda took a Coty™ emery board from the middle drawer of the OfficeMax™ desk and began unconcernedly to sharpen her claw-like nails.

"I'm your replacement. Mister Gameboy™ called the pool this morning and had them send me up."

"My—my replacement? But why?"

"I don't know, and I don't care. All I know is that Mister Gameboy™ wants to see you immediately."

"I'll—I'll go see him then...."

Linda sneered. "How clever of you. Let me buzz him."

Sally's replacement depressed the call button on the Radio Shack™ intercom. "Oh, Mister Gay-hame-boy™," lilited Linda Lurex™, "it's that person you wanted to see...."

"Send Miss NutraSweet™ in, please."

Taking heart from the neutral tone of her boss' voice, Sally bucked up her courage and entered Mister Gameboy's™ inner office.

Seated behind his Ethan Allen™ executives desk, Mister Gameboy™ was playing his shirt. The garment was a Microsoft™ nano-driven flexidisplay, its buttons the controls. Currently, the shirt was running Tetris™. With his fleshy chin tucked into his chest, Mister Gameboy™ seemed intent on breaking through to some hitherto unreachable screen.

"Have a Naugahyde™ chair, Miss NutraSweet™. I'll be right with you."

Savagely twiddling his cuff buttons, swiveling from side to side in his chair, lunging and darting, Mister Gameboy™ eventually succeeded in beating the game, causing a cacophony of celebratory computer noises to emerge from his collar speakers.

Mister Gameboy™ vigorously shot his cuffs and straightened up his bulky frame. His patrician smooth-shaven features had reverted to their usual imperturbability. Sally could smell his Aramis™ from where she sat.

"Now, what can I do for you, Miss NutraSweet™?"

Mister Gameboy's™ apparent unconcern was too much for Sally. After the unsettling morning, she simply broke down.

"Muh-muh-mister Gameboy™, I'm so suh-suh-sorry! I puh-puh-promise I'll nuh-nuh-never be late again!"

Immediately, Mister Gameboy™ was by her side.

"Please, Miss NutraSweet™, don't cry. Were you late this morning? I never even noticed. Here, have a Kleenex™ and stop crying."

Sally accepted the Kleenex™. She wiped her tears, blew her nose, and attempted a wan smile.

"You didn't notice I was late? Then why is that—that woman sitting at my desk?"

"Now, now, Miss NutraSweet™, I know you and Miss Lurex™ have never been the best of friends. But there's no need to employ such language with regards to her."

"I'm sorry. But I was hurt to see her there."

"Miss Lurex™ is merely filling in for you for an indefinite period. You see, I have a new temporary assignment for you. Something much more challenging than your usual work. If you're willing to take it, and if you succeed at it, you'd be doing an inestimable service to the whole FDA, and to all your fellow consumers."

Sally was puzzled. "Why, what could it possibly be?"

Mister Gameboy™ returned to his Ethan Allen™ desk but remained out front, resting one haunch on a corner. He folded his arms across his chest, thereby warping his Microsoft™ shirt display into a weird rainbow of patterns.

"Miss NutraSweet™. I assume you keep up with the news, and are aware of the activities of those dissidents known as the Zebras...."

"Tom NutraSweet™ just did an infomercial on them last week. 'Those Rogue Generics: Growing Threat or Hollow Bogeymen?'...."

Levelling an intense gaze at her, Mister Gameboy™ said, "Let me assure you, Miss NutraSweet™, that whatever conclusions your channel's reporter reached were carefully vetted and approved by the Fun and Duty Administration with an eye toward keeping consumer confidence stable. It's no mark of distrust toward your clan in particular, or any clan at all. It's just that the FDA has an obligation toward society as a whole which supercedes an individual's right to full label disclosure."

The Zebras are planning villainy unthinkable. They plan to topple the FDA beanstalk,

Mister Gameboy™ continued to regard Sally with a fervent frankness that made her giddy as a double shot of Finlandia™. She wondered where his talk could possibly be leading.

"I'm now about to reveal several things," continued Sally's boss, "which are unknown to the average consumer, and which I must have your assurance will not go beyond this room."

"Of course, Mister Gameboy™. Whatever you say."

"Very well. First, I will confide in you that the Zebras are not the small group of anarchists portrayed by the multimedia. They are, in fact, a large, well-organized and well-funded group of malcontents whose roots strike deep into the very heart of the FDA."

Sally gasped. "No! I can't believe any sane consumer would even sympathize with the Zebras, never mind help them!"

"It's sad but true. For whatever perverted reason, certain high-placed officials have thrown their lot in with the renegades. And this, Miss NutraSweet™, is where you come into the picture."

"I don't see—"

Mister Gameboy™ held up a hand to interrupt. "Miss NutraSweet™—Sally, if I may—don't be frightened at what I'm about to tell you. The Zebras are planning new villainy, infamy of a magnitude hitherto unthinkable. They plan to topple the FDA beanstalk, this magnificent structure we sit in at this very moment, symbol of our society's wonderful accomplishments and sane stability."

Sally felt on the verge of swooning. This strange day seemed to have a never-ending supply of shocks in store.

Seeming to sense her confusion, Mister Gameboy™ rose and moved to Sally's side. He took one of her hands reassuringly in both of his.

"Sally, the FDA and all the clans need you to help avert this tragedy. I'm asking you to go undercover, to infiltrate the Zebras and return to me safely with the details of their plot."

"But—but—I'm just a NutraSweet™, a secretary! Why can't a professional handle this? Someone from the Brinks™ or Wells Fargo™ clan?"

"They're compromised, Sally. We have no way of being certain that any given agent is not a secret Zebra sympathizer. They're the first ones the generics targeted. But someone like you—thanks to your low profile and humble station and spotless record—is absolutely trustworthy."

"Mister Gameboy™, I'm honored that you would consider me for this assignment. But I don't have any training—"

Releasing her hand, Mister Gameboy™ straightened his spine and assumed a stern mien.

"Miss NutraSweet™. One hundred years ago, when the whole world was on the verge of collapse, reeling under the onslaughts of gang violence, ozone holes, overpopulation, starvation, techno-hip-hop music, religious wars, rising sea-levels, disintegrating infrastructures, and weak consumer spending, a group of brave men and women—possessing no more special abilities than either you or I—saw what had to be done and did it. They instituted the clan-product system and the Fun and Duty Administration. Through fire and storm, riot and rebellion, against all odds and all benighted opponents, they built the system we inherited, a system that ensures each individual has a place in a happy extended brand-name family. For a whole century the globe has been peaceful and productive. Now, a group of deviants threatens our inheritance, and the times call for the average member of society like yourself to do extraordinary deeds."

"Miss NutraSweet™—are you going to let the Founding Trademarkers and the Global Warranty down? Or are you going to live up to their shining example?"

Sally found that her eyes were wet at the end of Mister Gameboy's™ paean to brand-name loyalty. She was certain they were red as well, and wished for some Visine™.

"Mister Gameboy™, I—it's an honor. I'll do my best. How do I begin?"

"Excellent! First, you're to visit the Mary Kay™ offices on the 99th floor. They'll arrange your disguise. Then, you'll be exiled to the Bargain Bin just as if you were a regular criminal. As far as returning goes, you'll have a special Bristol-Meyers™ organipass coded to your genotype. Simply present it to the border guards, and they'll see you safely back to me."

"And how do I learn about the plot?"

"I'm afraid I can't help you there, Miss NutraSweet™. You'll have to play it by ear."

Sally could sense that Mister Gameboy™ was ready for her to leave. She got to her feet and turned to go, then stopped.

"Mister Gameboy™, there's one last thing. Could I—could I at least tell my fiancé where I'm going? He's totally trustworthy. There's not a better man or a more faithful consumer around!"

"Hmmm. Your boyfriend is Dan Duracell™, isn't he? Yes, he's not a security risk. You may confide in him. But no one else!"

"Oh, thank you, Mister Gameboy™!"

"Thank you, Miss NutraSweet™."

Sally left.

Outside, Linda Lurex™, despite her haughty arrogance, looked somehow pitiable to Sally. She couldn't be trusted with this assignment!

Sally interpreted Mister Gameboy's™ permission to talk to Dan as taking precedence over reporting to the Mary Kay™ division, so she headed directly to where they had planned to meet for lunch. By now, it was almost noon!

IT TOOK SALLY 15 MINUTES TO WALK A QUARTER OF THE WAY around the beanstalk, to the first Chevy™ loading station. Once inside the bustling terminal, she headed straight for the Kentucky Fried Chicken™ megaplex.

Here it was that fate had first brought Sally together with the handsome and rugged Dan Duracell™.

Sally had been in the terminal on one of her days off, waiting to embark on a daytrip to an orbiting Caesar's Palace™ casino, when she decided to have an Original Recipe™ lunch. The restaurant was crowded, and she had been forced to sit at a table occupied by a group of rowdy Duracell™, Energizer™ and Everready™ techs, those workers responsible for the smooth functioning of the beanstalk.

One of these men—their boss, as it eventuated—had been different. Quiet, calm, with a knowing smile, he had been particularly courteous to Sally, drawing her out with much more than merely cordial interest. He seemed to want to know everything about her and her job in Mister Gameboy's™ office.

From that chance meeting, their romance had bloomed through a succession of dates—visits to the Showcase Cinema™ and Chuck E. Cheese™, among other venues—and into a solid commitment to eventual marriage.

Now, her heart beating with excitement, Sally saw Dan across the crowded restaurant. In his black and gold coveralls and cylindrical foil cap topped with a fake anode, he was the most striking figure in the place.

Soon, Sally was in Dan's manly embrace. When he finally released her from the warm clench, she spoke.

"Dan, I have the most exciting news to tell you. I've got a new job!"

infamy of a magnitude hitherto mbol of our society's wonderful accomplishments...."

"You haven't left Mister Gameboy's™ office?" asked Dan concernedly, as he escorted her to an empty table.

"Well, in a way...."

Sally explained her mission.

Dan's face assumed a worried look. "Gosh, Sally, I just don't know. It sounds awfully dangerous."

By now, Sally had come completely around to Mister Gameboy's™ way of thinking. "Not at all! Those Zebras wouldn't dare hurt an official representative of the FDA. And besides, I don't plan on ever letting them find out I'm anything but a hardened criminal like themselves!"

Dan laughed. "My little Sally, a Zebra! It seems impossible, not to mention extremely risky."

"But I told you how the Zebras plan to destroy the beanstalk unless I discover their plans!"

"I think Gameboy's™ worried without reason, though I can't blame him for playing it cautious. Why, it would take at least four Martin-Marietta™ laser cannons of at least 10 billion candlepower each, equipped with Hughes™ repeaters and positioned at precise 90-degree intervals around the base of the tower to cut through. And how could the Zebras possibly arrange such a thing, unless they had suborned the entire tech crew?"

At that moment a large Siemens™ robot made of Lego™ blocks politely approached their table.

"Could you please sign for this delivery of four crates, Mister Duracell™?"

"Certainly."

After the robot had left, Dan said, "Well, I can't say I'm not awfully proud of my little girl, playing the spy like this. Just take care of yourself, and come home safe to Mama Duracell's™ favorite son."

"I will, Dan. Oh, I'll be ever so sly and tricky!"

Dan swept Sally up in his arms for a final embrace, and then they parted.

Hastening to her appointment with the Mary Kay™ representative, Sally was already envisioning her successful return. Mister Gameboy™ would be so proud of her that he would give her a raise; perhaps, if security allowed, the multimedia would do a feature on her, detailing her daring exploits. And Dan—Dan would be so relieved and happy! Perhaps he would even want to push up the date of their marriage. She would finally have to make up her mind about her gown. Last month's online Brides™ magazine had featured, at her request, several possible choices. But it was so hard combining the NutraSweet™ and Duracell™ motifs into a tasteful pattern. (And how in the world would she ever get used to being known as "Sally Duracell™"?)

Soon, Sally was knocking at the door of the cosmetics division of the FDA and had to put all such frivolous thoughts from her mind.

I must concentrate on my mission, she reminded herself.

The door was opened by a Mary Kay™. The man wore the traditional hot pink jumpsuit and the requisite Kabuki-thick makeup. His false eyelashes were at least two inches long, and Sally wondered how he could even see.

"Hi," said the Mary Kay™ in a pleasant baritone. "I'm Mark, and you must be Sally. Mister Gameboy™ told me you'd be coming in for a makeover. Step right this way."

Soon, Sally was seated in front of a digital mirror wall.

"First," said Mark, "we've got to remove your trademark."

Sally flinched, although she had known such a step would be involved in her subterfuge. She had no idea how she would feel with her trademark removed, since she had had it literally since birth, but she expected the sensation would not be pleasant.

Mark put the barrel of a Squibb™ nanopercuter against her brow and pulled the trigger.

It took only seconds for her trademark to dissolve itself. Mark increased the magnification of the mirror, and the nearly obscene image of Sally's naked face filled the wall. Her heart began to beat wildly.

"There, there," said Mark, "don't worry. I know just how you're feeling. I've seen a hundred brides go through such a spell when I change over their trademarks to their husband's...."

"But I'm not getting married today! This is something I never counted on!"

"Don't fret, dear." Mark picked up a second gun and shot her in the arm.

Almost instantly, Sally was Zebraified.

Where her lovely NutraSweet™ trademark had been now flared a hideous symbol of moral, financial and social degradation.

A bar code!

And not only was it on her brow, but the Un-Person Code was replicated like measles or leprosy all over her body!

"You're UPC now all right," said Mark with unseemly glee. "For all anyone knows, you could be Lunchmeat yourself, merciless leader of the rebels."

Although Sally felt only like wailing, she steeled herself not to. She had a mission to complete, and this was a necessary part of it. The sooner she finished her task, the sooner she could regain her lovely aspartame swirl.

Mark tossed a pair of shapeless black-and-white-striped coveralls into her lap. "You can change in the dressing room while I call Hertz™ transport."

Sally did so, discarding her pretty frock and pumps and Victoria's Secret™ undies in favor of the scratchy coveralls and a pair of green foam hospital slippers she found in the changing booth. (Her Bristol-Meyers™ organipass, she was relieved to find, was secreted in one pocket, and she blessed Mister Gameboy's™ legendary attention to details.)

When she emerged and saw herself in the mirror, she almost cried again. But before she could, the two Hertz™ men had surrounded her. Both carried Glock™ sidearms and exhibited a cruel indifference to her condition.

"OK, Zebe," said one, "let's shake it. It's a good half hour ride to the Bin."

The men hustled Sally out the door.

"So long!" called out the Mary Kay™ rep cheerfully. "Remember—you only feel as good as you look!"

Sally drew what comfort she could from the motto.

The Hertz™ transport was a Textron™ copter whose passenger seats were separated from the pilot's compartment by a wire screen. The men strapped Sally in, and they were soon airborne.

Thankful that no other prisoners were riding with her, Sally used the time alone to compose herself and adopt the hardened persona she would need to survive in the cruel generic world of the Bargain Bin. She was aided in this by the coarse language the Hertz™ men would occasionally toss at her.

"Look at that get-up! It's probably made of cotton!"

"Cotton! Are you kidding? The FDA wouldn't waste cotton on a Zebe! I bet it's pure polyester!"

Attempting to get into her new role, Sally shot back, "Fuh-fuh-fish! You guys can just eat fish!"

The roughnecks only laughed. "That's just what you'll be doing soon enough, sister!"

In all too short a time, the Blue Lights of the Bargain Bin could be seen below them.

Do you have any real notion of the you don't! Well, I made a vow to topple the system that

The Bargain Bin was a 1,000-square-mile enclave that had once been the Ancients' largest landfill. Rising up like an artificial butte from the surrounding plain, it was surmounted by a thick, high wall, topped with razor-wire and the symbolic Blue Lights. Armed guards patrolled the entire rampart.

Inside the Bin, Sally knew, the authorities never ventured, only dropping in supplies. Anarchists and dictators fought for control of the prisoners' lives, and existence was precarious at best....

The copter landed atop the wide wall, Sally was transferred to the care of the guards, and the copter took off.

One of the Brinks™ men gestured with his Smith and Wesson™ crowd-control shotgun. "Down the stairs, Zebe."

Sally entered the indicated door and found herself in a dimly lit circular stairwell.

The door slammed behind her.

With no choice, she began to descend.

Before she reached the bottom, her calves had begun to ache. All those hours on the Stairmaster™ had not prepared her for this torturous descent.

Finally, she stood before the exit. Hesitating a moment, she pushed on the panic-bar and stepped out into her new home.

It was 3 in the afternoon, and lonely shadows advertising Purina Dog Chow™ slanted across the Bin. Sally could hardly believe that it was still the same day which had begun so beautifully with Pepsi™ radiance pouring into her faraway bedroom....

A big black man was waiting for her. His bar coding, Sally noticed, was done in white.

Extending his hand, the man said, "Hi. My name's Harry."

Sally shook hands. "Harry what?"

Harry laughed ruefully. "We don't use last names here, it's too painful. But if you must know, I used to be a Wetnap™. I'm the Welcome Wagon™, so to speak. If you want me to show you around, I charge a day's food."

The way Harry uttered the noxious noun was so straightforward that Sally knew no offense was intended. She pondered his offer while she took a longer look around.

Crowds of Zebras circled her vicinity like vultures, plainly waiting for her to refuse Harry so they could move in on her. In the doorway of one generic cinderblock building, a scarred man cleaned his teeth with a homemade knife....

Sally shivered, and turned back to Harry. "Sure. It sounds fair."

"Great. C'mon."

Sally was glad for her escort. The desperadoes and ne'er-do-wells stepped aside from Harry's path, and she noticed how he kept one hand in his pocket at all times.

"We'll get you your meal ticket and a berth in one of the nicer ladies' dorms. Then I'll show you around a bit."

Harry led her across the grassy mesa to a large building from which wafted the odors of cooking. Inside its lobby he secured her a smartcard from a Zebra female who apparently had somehow finagled the concession, and who demanded another day's food from Sally.

After the transaction, Harry explained. "Your card's good for three meals a day. I know you've gotta eat too, so you don't have to pay me or that gal all at once. I'll take a meal a day for the next three days, and so will she. You can get by on one."

Sally's knees had grown weak at the smell of the food. She had not eaten since breakfast....

Harry noticed. "Say, what am I thinking of? Want something now?"

"I could use a little bite...."

Harry conducted her into the big open refectory. They took scratched plastic trays and battered stainless-steel utensils and joined a line.

There was no choice of anything. One simply took an already prepared salad, a main dish, a drink, and a dessert from among a dozen identical plates.

Sally had never felt more humiliated. Even her new clothing had not been as painful as this ritual.

Proferring her card at the end of the line, Sally paid for both her meal and Harry's. Then they carried them to a table.

Staring at a square pink hunk of unidentifiable processed meat, Sally asked, "Is that, uh, Spam™?"

Harry roared in laughter, and everyone looked. "You'll never see nothing fine as Spam™ again, honey! This here is mystery meat!"

Sally braced herself and choked it down, along with the pasty instant mashed potatoes, imitation orange drink and chocolate-flavored pudding.

Afterwards, Sally followed her guide as he secured her the promised dorm space in a hall where the bunks ran in endless tiers 20 high. Unfortunately, only top ones were vacant. Sally massaged one calf wistfully.

"Now I'm gonna take you to the church I go to. Then you're on your own."

The notion of a church in the Bin struck Sally as odd. She could hardly imagine any of the Official Religions maintaining a mission here, although maybe the Mormons™....

Harry led her to an innocuous building that looked like all the rest. Inside its anteroom, he paused.

"I know a lotta folks abandon all respect for the trademarks when they find themselves here. But there's a few of us who still keep the faith, no matter how bad society has treated us. I hope you'll be one of them."

With that, Harry led her into the half-lit interior of the "church."

ON AN ALTAR AT THE FRONT OF THE ROOM WERE ARRAYED dozens of empty cans, bottles, packages and actual products, all of which were yellowed, grimed, aged and distressed. Yet here and there the beautiful trademarks still shone through.

There was a Campbell's Soup™ can and a package of Birds-Eye™ peas. The wrapper from some Charmin™ bathroom tissue was draped over a Sears Roebuck™ battery. A Sara Lee™ cakebox stood next to a jar of Tang™. A used Huggie™ emitted a petrified odor over the congregants.

Respectful of the assembled kneeling worshippers, Harry whispered. "Down in the basement, we've dug into the old landfill. The cops would stop us if they knew. But as long as we keep a low profile, we can still be close to the sacred trademarks...."

The sight of the venerable brand-names brought a tear to Sally's eye, and inspired her with courage. Even amidst such despair and squalor, some ideals remained....

"Thank you for showing me this, Harry. If I'm here very long, I promise I'll attend."

Harry hustled her out of the church. Once outside, he said, "What do you mean, if you're here long? You've been sentenced for life, girl!"

Sally adopted a conspiratorial tone. "I'm only here as long as the FDA's in power, if you get my drift."

"You don't mean...."

"Yes! I want to hook up with the one they call Lunchmeat!"

depths of my anger? No, of course warped me, and I'm on the verge of accomplishing it!"

Harry shook his head. "You don't know what you're getting into...."

"Please, Harry!" Sally played a sudden hunch. "I ask you as a former NutraSweet™ speaking to a former Wetnap™!"

The invocation of the old clan names seemed to decide Harry. "All right. But don't say I didn't warn you!"

Now the two set out on a twisting and devious path across the face of the old landfill. Down back alleys and across rooftops they went, until Sally was thoroughly lost.

At last they stood in front of a chipboard door seemingly like any other. Harry knocked, and a panel slid open.

"Does your car use Mobil™?" asked the anonymous person on the other side.

"No. It runs on gasoline."

"Enter, friend."

Harry said, "I'm leaving you now, girl. Politics ain't my thing. Good luck."

So saying, Harry hastened away before Sally could even thank him. Meanwhile, the door had opened.

Sally went in.

A motley group of Zebras awaited her, hard-faced men and women all.

One, a short gray-haired woman, spoke.

"Why are you here?"

"I—I want to join you. I've heard a rumor that you plan something big, something that involves the beanstalk. I—I used to work there, and I thought maybe I could help you with some inside information...."

The woman smiled. "What kind of information?"

"I'll only tell that to Lunchmeat himself."

The woman approached Sally and grabbed the fabric of her coveralls. "Why should we trust you? What makes you hate the FDA so much you'd go against them?"

Sally gulped. "Well, they sent me here—"

"For what?"

"Yeah," said another Zebra. "What are you in for?"

Sally thought fast. "I—I drew a mustache on a billboard of Aunt Jemima™!"

The Zebras gasped, and the one holding Sally released her. "You're OK, kid. Let's bring you to the boss."

THE INNER SANCTUM OF THE REBEL'S HQ WAS WINDOWLESS and illuminated only by a single generic 25-watt bulb. Behind a desk sat a figure with his back to the door. Sally was left alone with him. After a long, tense time that seemed to stretch like Silly Putty™, he turned.

Sally shrieked. "Mister Gameboy™!"

Mister Gameboy™—Zebraified like Sally—stood. He advanced on Sally, who cowered back against the closed door.

"Are you really so surprised, Miss NutraSweet™? I'm flattered that my masquerade was so seamless."

Sally bit a knuckle. "But—but why?"

Mister Gameboy's™ face assumed a malevolent look. "Did I never mention to you, Miss NutraSweet™, that I was not born into the Gameboy™ clan, that my high status in life is the result of purchasing a false identity, a borrowed past?"

"What—what clan were you born into?"

Mister Gameboy™ leaned into Sally and spat out the name.

"The Ty-D-Bowls™!"

His face purpling, Mister Gameboy launched into a vituperative

speech the likes of which Sally had never heard.

"Do you have any idea, Miss NutraSweet™, what it's like to be born into such a vile clan? To grow up enduring the taunts of all the little Nissans™ and Saltines™ and Oscar Meyers™? 'Bobby Blue-face' they called me! And other names too horrid to sully your virginal ears with. Even the Ajax™ kids looked down on me. Eighteen years of such torment I endured, until I made my escape. Do you have any real notion of the depths of my anger? No, of course you don't! Because you had the good fortune to be born into your sticky-sweet clan! Well, I made a vow to topple the system that warped me so, and now I'm on the verge of accomplishing it!"

Sally had begun to cry. "But why involve me in your schemes?"

"Because I hate you! I've hated you since the moment you came to work for me! You represent everything I despise about our society. The thought of your ultimate degradation was all that kept me from puking at your every word!"

An inner door opened, and Linda Lurex™ emerged.

"Oh, Bobby, I love it when you talk that way! Can we do it now?"

"You bet! I've waited long enough!"

With this, Mister Gameboy™ pinioned Sally's wrists together in a grip like Krazy Glue™ and marched her through the second door.

The next room resembled a high-ceilinged warehouse space, its upper reaches accessible by catwalks.

Halfway across the room, a giant metal vat loomed. Sally was urged toward it.

At its edge, she was fitted with a harness under her arms, which were then bound. A stout rope was attached to the harness, and soon Sally found herself lifted off the floor.

Joyfully, Mister Gameboy™ hauled away on the tackle while Linda Lurex™ watched. Sally found herself hoisted above the middle of the vat, whereupon her captor secured the rope to a stanchion.

Looking down, she saw a seething blue liquid in the cauldron.

Sally gasped. "Not—"

"Yes," roared Mister Gameboy™. "Boiling Ty-D-Bowl water!"

The villain she could only think of now as Lunchmeat took a knife from his pocket.

"Prepare to die, Miss NutraSweet™!"

Slowly, the knife bit into the rope. A strand popped audibly.

"Not so fast!"

Sally looked up.

Dan Duracell™ stood on the catwalk! And he held a gun!

Linda Lurex™ yelped. Sally's ex-boss seemed bewildered. "No, Dan. We—"

Before he could speak further, two shots rang out. The evildoer and his moll crumpled to the floor, where they lay like used Scott Towels™.

In a trice, Dan vaulted to the floor, lowered Sally and unbound her. When she could speak again, she said, "Dan, Dan, I don't understand anything!"

"Don't worry, dear," said the valiant Duracell™. "I won't let anyone harm you."

Sally relaxed a bit. "Oh, Dan, tell me we'll get married and raise a family and everything will be fine...."

"Well, it might be a little different than you imagine. But, yes, everything will be fine."

Dan reached into a pocket of his gold and black coveralls and miraculously removed a condensation-beaded can of Coke™, which shone in Sally's eyes like the Holy Grail.

"You look like you could use some refreshment, dear."

"You're so thoughtful, Dan. I—"

"Hush. Just sip your soda." □

While residents of California nervously await the great earthquake they call The Big One, perhaps they should instead start worrying about—

The Bigger One

BY GREGORY BENFORD
Illustration by Jim Nuttle

ANNOUNCER: That finishes the roundup on damage in the Los Angeles area from the Big One—an earthquake measuring 8.1 on the Richter scale. To recap, devastation in Los Angeles and San Diego counties is widespread, with fires raging. There is mercifully little loss of life because the Big One was centered somewhere to the southeast of Southern California. We have a report now from Herb Walker, on the scene near the border town of Mexicali.

WALKER: The quake center lay somewhere south of here, and big aftershocks are continuing. I'm standing at a desert highway intersection, where people have stopped to wait out the aftermath, obviously unsure of where to go.

Distant trembling, heavy winds. A car door slams.

WALKER: Excuse me, what was it like for you, sir?

MAN: Awful. And these aftershocks, they're worse than the earthquake was.

WOMAN: We're OK, out here in the desert. Nothing to fall on us.

WALKER: Aftershocks are lessening, but we can't get through to Mexicali. Have you seen anyone from that direction? What were your emotions as—

MAN: Hey, what's that sound?

Faint rumble in the distance.

WOMAN: I can't see anything in all this damned dust.

A growing growl, deep bass. Winds howl louder.

WOMAN: Something's coming. Like a big truck or—

MAN: No truck is *that* big. Feel that? The ground's trembling.

Growling turns to a heavy rumble.

ANNOUNCER: Herb, can you hear me? We have reports of a breakthrough of the Pacific Ocean along the new openings in the San Andreas fault. Satellite photos show water

rushing through the break from the Gulf of California. Can you see any evidence of this?

Rumble grows. Worried shouts.

WALKER (*shaken*): You mean that sound, that's the *ocean*?

WOMAN: Coming at us from the south!

MAN (*dryly*): Solves our problem of where to go. Mexicali isn't there anymore.

WOMAN: It's *loud*.

MAN: But why should it come here? This is desert, way far inland.

WOMAN: We're maybe 50 miles from the Gulf of California. The fault must've unzipped all along that north-south line.

ANNOUNCER: Herb? Can you see any—

A deep, bass roar, like rolling thunder. Hoarse yells. Screams.

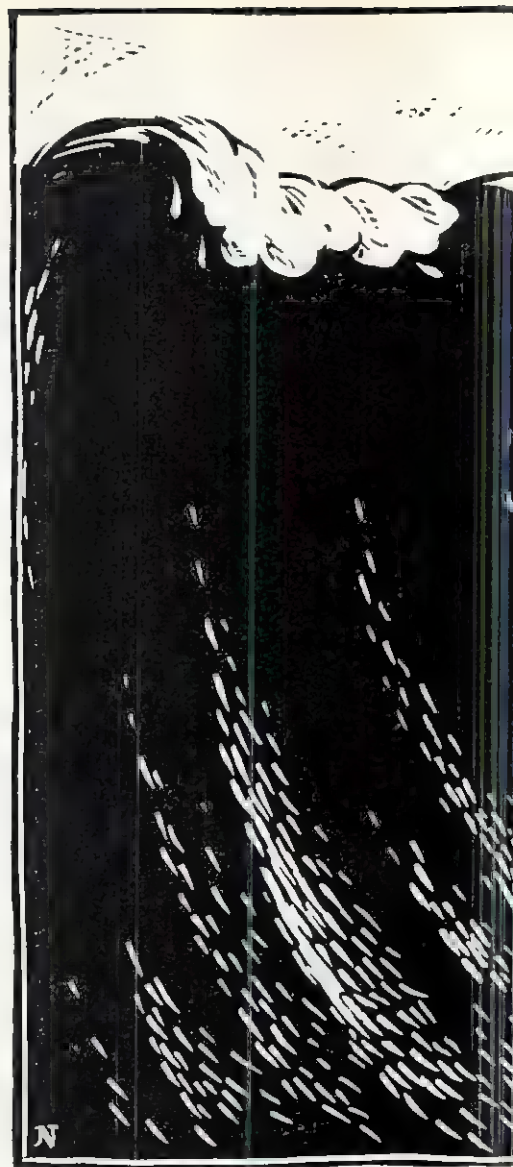
MAN: Hey, your radio guy just ran off. Hope this headset works. Hear me? Get some helicopters here right away! I can see a dark line south of here, might be the ocean. Please, helicopters, they could pick us up—

Sudden silence.

ANNOUNCER: We seem to have lost contact with our unit near Mexicali. Let's go to Pamela Merkle, somewhere to the north in a mobile unit. Pamela, can you—

MERKLE: I'm in a van speeding up along Route 111, with my driver, Doug Aron. Traffic is all around us, panicked. We just passed a burning shopping mall.

Tires howl. Wind roars. Snapping flames. Distant sirens.



MERKLE: My God, this dust, I can't see anything. We're going so fast!

ARON: That water, it'll be moving hard. We got to run.

MERKLE: But we'll hit somebody!

ARON: Just be glad more people didn't get out of Mexicali, or there'd be a jam.

MERKLE: If you keep driving like this—

Horn blares. Distant angry shouts.

ARON: Damn fools! Packing a pickup truck full like that, and they're not even going 50.

MERKLE: Look, there's a boy. We should pick him up.

ARON: We don't dare stop. Somebody'll rear-end us.

Van thrums louder, but an ominous rumble overwhelms it.

MERKLE: We're hitting 90 here, heading north, but the noise behind us keeps getting louder. I'm trying to see out the back.

ANNOUNCER: Pamela, we have reports that Mexicali is completely inundated by water. I'd advise you—

MERKLE: My God. A wall. A black wall.

ARON: How far away? How big?



MERKLE: It's hard to tell. A mile? Tall as an office building, maybe more. It's so broad, like a barrier.

ARON: It's chasing us. Question is, how far will it go?

MERKLE: The guidebook, it said this whole place, the Imperial Valley, it's more than 200 feet below sea level.

ARON: Damn—like Death Valley. A deep-fish frying pan.

ANNOUNCER: Pamela, the water is reportedly moving at 70 miles per hour. Make every effort—

MERKLE: We're running for our lives! Hey—there's the exit sign for Brawley.

ARON: The town's dead meat. God, look at the traffic ahead. Big interchange here.

MERKLE: We'll never get through.

ARON: We've got to. Where's the water now?

MERKLE: Closer. So *big*.

ARON: It'll fill this whole valley. If we can just get—

MERKLE: Wait, even if we get through the traffic, we'll be heading toward the Salton Sea.

ARON: Yeah, so?

MERKLE: That's the lowest part of the valley!

ARON: Jesus, you're right. Where can we go?

MERKLE: East—go east. The Chocolate Mountains.

ARON: Yeah, right, get some altitude.

MERKLE: I hope to God that'll slow it down. It's so—

ARON: There's the turnoff—Route 78, right?

Engine strains, roars. The rumble gathers force.

ANNOUNCER: We have dispatched a rescue helicopter for you, Pamela. If you could just—

MERKLE: No time for that!

ARON: It's gaining on us.

MERKLE: Of course—now we're running parallel to the water. I can see it better—it's so tall!

ARON: Yeah, but we're getting higher. Hope this Chevy holds up. We're doing a hundred, going uphill.

MERKLE: These hills—they're high. Maybe—

ARON: These aren't hills, they're sand.

Sand dunes.

MERKLE: The water—it's catching up!

ARON: I'll run us up this dune. If it's tall enough—

A thunderous, watery roar.

MERKLE: It's all around us!

Engine flags, sputters. Rushing water. Engine chokes off. Ignition whines, fails.

ARON: Water's rising. Try the door.

MERKLE: God, it's everywhere.

ARON: Get out, hold onto the door. Here—*Pamela screams. Door wrenches open. Cascading water.*

ARON: Climb up. That's it—onto the roof. Here—

MERKLE: Take my hand. Hurry!

ARON: Ah! Current almost got me. Stand here, hold onto me.

MERKLE: Is it still rising?

ARON: I can't tell. The big splash is past, though.

MERKLE: I've still got my mobile transmitter. Can you hear me? We're standing on top of the van. Water everywhere, muddy, salty. It's coming over the windshield.

Continued on page 94

Death must inevitably come for each of us—
but try telling that to Kedrigern the wizard!

QUALITY TIME

BY JOHN MORRESSY

Illustration by Bob Eggleton

RAVENS CALLED AND CIRCLED OVERHEAD. THE FIELD BELOW WAS STILL. The living had gone, bearing off their prizes and their wounded comrades. The dying had ceased to moan. Nothing remained behind but corpses, hacked and shattered weaponry, and a waste of churned-up blood-soaked mud.

The wizard Kedrigern seated himself on a rock and surveyed the carnage, sighing and shaking his head slowly and sadly. He sat there for a long time without moving. When a mud-spattered knight on a weary steed rode slowly to his side, he showed no sign of awareness.

"We've won. The field is ours," said the knight.

Without looking up, the wizard said, "You've lost good men, Vernian. Too many of them."

"Bersac lost more men than we did. He was a fool to do battle."

"It could have been avoided."

"Am I to accept his insults? Be called a coward?"

Kedrigern fixed him with a cold eye. "No one will call you a coward, Vernian. But they might question your wisdom. How many men died today? A hundred? Two hundred? And for what? For a patch of mud and rocks no good to anyone except as a burying-ground for the men who lost their lives fighting over it."

"We fought to win back the land stolen from our fathers," said the knight. "The fallen will be remembered as heroes."

"I'm sure they will," said Kedrigern, rising stiffly and stretching. "But I wonder if the widows and the orphans might have been happier with men a little less heroic but still alive."

"You're not a man of war. You don't understand."

"I don't. And I don't want to."

"Yet you came to our aid. You shielded us against the spells of Bersac's wizard."

Kedrigern shrugged. "I couldn't refuse an old friend. And a generous fee."

Vernian laughed and reached down to clap a hand on his shoulder. "That sounds more like the Kedrigern I know. This peevish humor will pass. Tonight we tend to the wounded. Tomorrow we celebrate, and you will be rewarded."

"Thank you, Vernian. I don't wish to spoil your victory. I simply dislike seeing good men die."

"All men die, wizard. The unfortunate fall to plague or famine or mischance. The fortunate die fighting for a worthy cause." Vernian tugged at the reins and his war horse wheeled. Over his shoulder, the knight called, "Leave this place to the scavengers. Come and help with the wounded."

Vernian rode off, but Kedrigern made no move to follow. He gazed out over the silent battlefield. The ravens had settled, and some were already at their work. The sun was almost at the horizon by this time, and the long shadows and quick flurries of motion by the scavengers were deceptive. He saw what appeared to be a moving shadow, and then noticed other, fainter shadows moving all around it. The fading light made everything indistinct, and he had to peer



through the Aperture of True Vision in his medallion to see clearly.

A dark figure was indeed ranging the battlefield, pausing by every fallen warrior, reaching down to rouse him as one might awaken a sleeping comrade. From each man rose a pale form that fell into place behind the funereal leader. The ragged procession grew longer and longer, and as it drew near, Kedrigern raised his hand in a salutation to the presence striding at the head. They were old acquaintances.

"Hello, Death. I thought I'd see you here," he called across the field.

The somber figure lifted its scythe in recognition, but did not reply or pause in its duties. Kedrigern looked on with detachment, as one whose work is done watches a busy man. He felt toward that grim and fearsome visitant the cautious good will of a man who has twice heard the dread summons to the Other Side and twice been told, with profound apologies, that there has been a slight error, these things happen from time to time, ever so sorry for any inconvenience we may have caused you, do be a good sport and let's say no more about it.

Kedrigern hated sloppy workmanship, but he bore no grudge. We all make mistakes, he conceded. Even Death. It was hard to dislike the poor overworked old gaffer, and impossible now to fear it.

AFTER IT HAD VISITED EACH FALLEN man, Death left their shades in a loose formation and joined the wizard, seating itself on the rock with a weary groan. "War has taken up my whole afternoon with this lot, and as soon as I deliver them, I'm off to the River Durdon. Plague is working the villages along the river. Heaven only knows how long I'll be tied up there. I tell you, I'm run off my feet."

"Still no assistant?"

"Not even talk of one. And no sympathy at all. Everyone else gets a day off now and then, but poor old Death can't take a holiday. Oh, no. And do I ever hear a word of thanks?" From out of the dark hood came a short bark of bitter laughter.

"You're too conscientious, that's your trouble."

"I know, I know," said Death with a martyred sigh. "In the old days, I used to have time for a game of chess with a client, but now..." Another deep sad sigh. "It's a wonder I can keep track of everything."

With a smile of sweet innocence, Kedrigern said, "As I recall, you've slipped up a couple of times."

Death attempted to brandish the scythe in an angry gesture, but nearly hit itself in the skull. Its voice was strained. "You promised you'd never breathe a word! You promised, Kedrigern!"

"I've kept my promise."

"Oh." A long silence followed, then Death said sheepishly, "I appreciate your silence. Really I do. I'd be mortified if anyone found out."

"No one will find out. Not from me," said Kedrigern, but Death, quite worked up by this time, paid no heed to the reassurance.

"It would be different if I were at fault, but it's all the doing of those snippy clerks. I mean, both times I was sent *expressly* to collect a wizard, and there *you* were, and of course they never allow me enough time to check the order properly, and their handwriting is terrible, and half the names are misspelled, and.... It never occurred to *them* that there might be two wizards in the same neighborhood."

"Obviously they're to blame."

"They need to be put in their place. Think they know it all, those desk types. No respect at all for us who do the real work."

"It's the same everywhere," said the wizard with a sympathetic sigh and a slow shaking of his head.

"You've been very decent about it, Kedrigern, and I won't forget your thoughtfulness. If there's ever anything...." Death fell abruptly silent, then rose hastily, saying, "I'd better get back to this lot. They're always a little stunned at first, but you know soldiers. Give them time to get over their surprise, and they'll be completely unmanageable."

"They're beginning to look restless."

"I do hate this. Soldiers are impossible. If they're not pleading and offering bribes, they're threatening and making demands. And the *language*! You wouldn't *believe*.... I really must go."

Death set off at a rapid stride, passing silently over the torn ground. A dozen steps away, it hesitated and turned. Kedrigern waved a farewell, but Death, instead of moving on, retraced its steps to rejoin him.

"I shouldn't do this, Kedrigern, but you've been so considerate...and I know I can trust you not to say anything," said Death.

"My lips are sealed," said the wizard.

"I've had a look at the roster. Your name is down."

The wizard was thunderstruck. "My name? *Me*?"

"Yes. For sometime toward the end of winter."

"But I'm not even a hundred and seventy! I'm nowhere near it! I'm practically a tot!" Kedrigern protested.

"Nevertheless, I saw your name."

"Wizards are supposed to live for centuries! Couldn't it have been a name like mine—Kenneth, or Kenilworth...or Kepler? Are you quite sure?"

"I'm sure," said Death.

"Absolutely sure? Positive? Beyond the shadow of a doubt?"

Death said not a word, but the dark hood nodded slowly and solemnly.

The wizard sat down on the rock and wiped his brow. He looked up with an inquiring glance. Death nodded once again and said, "I checked it with more than usual care. Believe me, it was your name."

"At the end of winter, you say?"

"Yes."

"And that's that? It's all arranged? Nothing to be done?"

Death was silent for an awkward moment. At last it said, "I'm not supposed to tell this to anyone—"

"Tell me!"

Death lowered its voice and said, "The roster is not absolutely final until it's been cleared by the Actuarial Department. You can always hope that the actuaries discover an error in the calculations. It happens...oh, once or twice every millennium."

Kedrigern glanced around, then leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Can you fix it so that they discover an error?"

Death recoiled two paces and stiffened. "My dear Kedrigern, how dare you even *suggest*...! After I've been kind enough.... Oh, really, you humans!"

The wizard gestured confusedly. "I didn't mean.... I'm just upset. You've taken me completely off guard."

Death unbent slightly and came a step closer. "I'm always doing that to people. Sorry."

"Is there nothing I can do?"

"If your time has run out, I'll just have to collect you."

Cries of "Chow! Where's the chow?" and "Who's got a drink?" reached their ears. The mass of pale ghosts hovering just above the field were getting restless. A few of them were roughhousing with one another, while others had gathered into groups and were laughing riotously. Shouts of "What kind of an outfit is this?" and "When do we get paid?" were drowned out by the opening bars of "Minnie, the Miller's Daughter."

"I must get back to them," said Death. "They'll be completely out of hand in a few more minutes. I'll be seeing you soon, Kedrigern." And with a parting flourish of its scythe, the dark figure strode noiselessly over the battlefield, all civility abandoned as it bellowed in its professional voice, "At ease, you lot! Drop those pikes. You won't need them where you're going. Form a column of twos. Quiet in the ranks! Stand tall! Forwaard—haw!" At the commands, the

*A dark figure was indeed ranging the battlefield...
From each man rose a pale form
that fell into place behind the funereal leader.*

pale forms shuffled into place and set out toward the west, where the sun was dipping below the horizon.

Darkness had fallen by the time Kedrigern finally bestirred himself and returned to Vernian's castle. All that night, as he tended to the injured men, he moved as one in a dream, responding only when someone shook his arm or shouted in his ear. Next day, at the feast to celebrate the victory, he was solemn and silent. When Vernian said, "How now, wizard? Why this mood? You're like the skeleton at the feast," he went pale and nearly choked on the wine he was sipping. His reaction caused great merriment all around him, but he did not join in. He wanted only to get away from this revelry and roistering, and brood on his fate.

NEXT DAY, ON THE ROAD THROUGH the forest, he did just that. His head bowed, his horse at a slow walk, he contemplated the injustice of it all. It was so terribly unfair. To be snuffed out before he had enjoyed even two full centuries—no age at all for a wizard. Carried off in his prime, his promise unfilled. Torn from the arms of his beloved princess. Their marriage had been blissful, but their years together were to be tragically few. Farewell to their home, and their happiness. Farewell to his friends, even the ones he did not particularly like. Farewell to his faithful troll, Spot. Farewell to counterspells, to disenchantments, to sautéed mushrooms, to wine. Unfair and unjust, that's what it was. And Death so cold and businesslike. "If your time has run out, I'll have to collect you." As if he were a parcel.

In the depth of his melancholic ruminations he became aware of a pleasant smell, the inviting aroma of meat cooking over an open fire, and his thoughts turned at once from the eschatological to the gustatory. He saw a man in a dusty traveling cloak seated by a campfire at the roadside and hailed him. To his surprise, the man sprang to his feet and cried out, "Kedrigern! Master! What a delight to meet you! Come, honor me by partaking in my simple repast." He did not recognize the man, nor could he imagine who he might be, but the smell of roasting meat was introduction enough for him.

The man, who promptly introduced himself as Scavendal, was a bustling energetic little fellow and a model of hospitality. His jubilant face was plump and rosy, fringed with a short white beard. He arranged a comfortable seat for Kedrigern, pressed meat and bread upon him, and practically danced with delight when Kedrigern drew forth a flask of Vernian's wine and offered to share it with him.

His name and his face remained unfamiliar, but he seemed to know a great deal about his unexpected visitor. After listening to Scavendal go on for a half-hour about his admiration for his guest and his wish to emulate him in every way, Kedrigern could bear the uncertainty no longer. He swallowed the last morsel of rabbit, wiped his fingers on a handful of grass, and said, "I must confess, Scavendal, that I can't recall when we met. Would you refresh my memory?"

"Ah, good master, until this very day I knew you only by reputation. But we did—in the figurative sense—cross swords, and that

very recently," the other replied, beaming.

Kedrigern thought for a moment, then cried out in recognition, "You were Bersac's wizard!"

Scavendal lowered his eyes demurely. "I was. You bested me at every turn, but it is an honor to be defeated by the master of counterspells."

"Ah, yes. That...that beclouding early on. Very...resourceful, I thought," said Kedrigern, picking his words with care. It was a polite lie. The magic that had come from the other side was of the most elementary kind; simple as it was, it had been botched in the delivery. Scavendal was clearly a fumbler of the worst sort. Given his tenuous grasp of magic, it was a wonder he had not spelled himself into a nasty predicament long ago. On the other hand, he had redeeming qualities: he served a tasty meal, and displayed a becoming respect for the real thing when he saw it.

"It's very kind of you to say so, Master Kedrigern."

"It would have benefited from being darker, though. And denser."

"I feared as much," Scavendal confessed.

"And it kept curling around Bersac's men. Got them a bit confused."

"Yes, I noticed that myself. I've always had a problem maintaining direction. But tell me, what did you think of my apparitions?"

Kedrigern recalled the sight of a few vague raggedy things waving what were probably meant to be bloody shrouds, but looked more like soiled nightshirts. "I didn't really have a close look."

"They were terrifying. If you hadn't turned them back so swiftly and expertly, Vernian's men would have collapsed *en masse* from sheer horror. And then my paralysis spell. *That* must have tested your mettle."

"Oh, did you use a paralysis spell?"

Both men were silent for a long time, and then, in a subdued voice, Scavendal said, "I'm not a very good wizard, am I?"

"You could use practice."

"That's the kindest thing anyone has ever said to me. Every one of my teachers has advised me to become an alchemist. But I refused to give up. This battle was my big chance." Scavendal stared glumly into the fire. "Bersac blamed me for his defeat. He would have hanged me if I hadn't fled. But I do so want to be a great wizard. Just like you."

"Oh...well," said Kedrigern, pleased but embarrassed.

"I want that more than anything else in the world. I have a proper wizard's robe, and a pointy hat, and everything."

Kedrigern's pleasure diminished. He himself dressed plainly. In his experience, the gaudier a wizard's outside, the less there was inside. Some of the most accomplished practitioners he knew looked like beggars. Forcing a genial avuncular smile, he said, "Just keep at it. You'll get there."

"But I'm such a slow learner. I need more time."

"So do I," Kedrigern said. "Right now, I need all I can get."

They both sighed. After another long pause, Scavendal said, "What we need to do is visit the Valley of Lost Time."

"Yes, it would be the answer to our problems. Too bad no one knows the way."

"I do," said Scavendal.

Kedrigern looked at him in frank disbelief. "Come now, Scavendal. My old teacher, Fraigus O' The Murk, knew everything there was to be known about temporal magic. He spent the better part of a century searching for the way to the Valley of Lost Time. He in-

vestigated every tale and legend, followed up every lead, and found no way. No guide, no map, nothing."

"There is a map. In fact...." Scavendal broke off and went to rummage in his pack. After several minutes of muttering and fumbling, he dumped the contents on the ground and pawed through them until he uncovered a roll of soft leather, which he flourished triumphantly. "I have it right here!"

He handed the map to Kedrigern, who unrolled it and studied it closely. It was beautifully drawn, brilliantly colored, and copiously annotated in cryptic squiggles. The landmarks, though not of the common sort, were clearly indicated. "Where did you get this?" he said at last.

"I bought it from an old old sorceress. She swore it was genuine."

"It is. Have you tried it?"

"I can't read any of those scripts. And such a quest might require magic, and considering my grasp of magic...." Scavendal gave him a sad look and threw up his hands.

Kedrigern nodded. There was no disputing Scavendal's judgment on that particular matter. As he returned his attention to the map, Scavendal sat down facing him. "But with your magic and my map...." He said no more, but flung out his arms and smiled broadly.

This was a preposterous coincidence. But coincidences happen all the time, Kedrigern told himself. He scrutinized the map once more. Several landmarks were familiar from references in old and trustworthy volumes. It was definitely authentic. And he had nothing to lose. "It's a deal," he said. "Let's start now. An entry point shouldn't be hard to find."

Scavendal stared at him, awed. "It shouldn't? The map doesn't say.... How can you tell?"

"The map makes it very clear. You just have to know how to read it," said Kedrigern. He was feeling better already.

"But the horses. Our packs."

Kedrigern threw dirt on the fire. "If we succeed, we'll return at the very instant we left. And if we don't succeed, we'll have far more serious things to worry about."

"But...but shouldn't we.... must we go right now?"

"Not losing your nerve, are you?"

"I never had much to lose. I'm not a brave man, Kedrigern."

"Buck up. You'll be fine once we get there."

FINDING THE ENTRY TOOK A MATTER OF minutes. Kedrigern took up position in a stream, with an oak on either hand, and recited the prescribed phrase. On the instant, the two men were standing between twisted columns of mottled stone that rose to disappear in the clouds. Before them, tall gates of black iron stood wide. Over the gates, in crimson letters, was the motto *The brave face no danger; the fearful know no safety*. A broad road opened beyond the gates, with woods dimly visible on either side through the mist that lay over all.

"Are we there?" Scavendal asked in a whisper.

"We're at the entrance. No need to whisper. Once we're on the high road, keep moving and don't stop. Ready?"

Scavendal nodded, looking very uncertain. Kedrigern passed through the gates and set out along the road at a brisk pace. Scavendal hurried to keep up. An incessant flood of noises poured from the woods. The noises ranged from the pleasing through the familiar to the horrifying, and though many were deafeningly loud, each was distinct. Vague shapes could be seen moving to and fro. Things flew overhead. Some were birds, some birdlike, and some unlike anything the wizards had ever seen or imagined.

"What *are* they?" Scavendal asked, his voice shaky.

"I don't know, but they can't hurt us."

"Look at them!"

"Everything on our left is past. It doesn't exist anymore. Everything on our right is future. It doesn't exist yet. Nothing can bother us unless we go in and start poking around."

"What's this road?"

"It's Now. The Eternal Present. The Ever-Flowing. It's only dangerous if you stop. Hesitate for an instant, and you'll be swept along and tumbled all to pieces."

"How do you know all this?"

"It's right on the map. Didn't you even try to read it?"

"I tried a hundred times. It made no sense to me."

Kedrigern clapped him on the shoulder. "When we get to the valley, make sure you grab yourself plenty of time. You're going to need it."

They walked on in silence, eyeing the greenery on either hand and trying to ignore the noises emerging from it. Suddenly, without even an instant of transition, the road and woods were gone. They stood on a vast plain where herds of great black oxen roamed.

Here Kedrigern paused for a time to check the map, then set forth at the same steady pace. Scavendal clutched his arm in a terrified grip. "Look at those creatures! They're gigantic! If we walk among them we'll be trampled!"

"They're only the Years. They move very slowly. Nothing to worry about."

Indeed, the cattle seemed oblivious to the wizards, who made their way undisturbed across the plain. It was a very broad plain, and the oxen were so huge that they could not see over them, and so numerous that they could not see around or between or under them, so they had no idea how far they had come or had still to go. Scavendal complained about his feet, and his wind, and the distance, and begged for a rest, and wanted a drink of water, but Kedrigern was unyielding.

He became aware of a noise at his back, a noise quite different from the low murmuring of the great herd. It came slowly closer, and both men cast frequent glances behind them, but they could see only the black beasts. The sound grew louder and more distinct, hurrying near. It was a kind of swooping, swooshing sound, as if a huge bird were following them with slow beats of titanic wings. Then, quite unexpectedly, the oxen parted and a chariot descended upon the plain.

It was a most unusual chariot. It had no pole and no yoke, yet it rolled to a stop in perfect balance, its two wheels half a handbreadth off the ground. It was of a pale blue, the color of a summer sky, and it had two great blue-gray wings that rose and fell in slow and graceful rhythm.

Kedrigern jumped in. "Come on, Scavendal," he said, holding out a hand. "We'll save ourselves some walking."

"But whose is it? Can we just take it like this? Won't they mind?"

Kedrigern seized his wrist and yanked him in. "It belongs to Time. And Time is very kind to those who use it wisely."

No sooner were they in than the chariot rose with a swift beating of wings. It soared upward, penetrating the clouds until it broke through to the clarity above them. The wings ceased to beat, extended themselves, and turned up slightly at the tips, and the chariot glided like an eagle over a billowing white sea.

Scavendal, huddled in the bottom of the chariot, his cloak over his face, whimpered, "How high are we?"

"Higher than a dragon flies. It's beautiful up here." They were moving faster than any dragon Kedrigern had ever ridden, but he felt only a comfortable breeze against his face and breast. He gripped the rim of the chariot and looked down into the whiteness. Through rifts in the clouds he had glimpses of light glittering on endless blue water.

On they flew, for what might have been a lifetime or the blink of an eye: here in the domain of Time, time moved at its own incomprehensible pace. The ocean became a river, flowing between green banks, and then the chariot swooped through the clouds and they were racing along above the golden sand of a limitless desert. Their speed was terrific, but the huge wings beat gently, and disturbed not a single grain, nor did they efface one footprint of the many that

*...the chariot rose with a swift beating of wings.
It soared upward, penetrating the clouds until it
broke through to the clarity above them.*

crossed the sands of Time.

The chariot slackened its speed. Kedrigern reached down to jostle Scavendal. "We're getting out soon."

"We'll be dashed to bits!" came Scavendal's muffled voice.

"No. We're just off the ground, and we're slowing. We must be near the Valley."

"Leave me here, Kedrigern. I can't possibly go on. I'm too terrified to move. Just leave me, and I'll make my way back somehow."

"You can't go back. Time flows in only one direction, and we must move with it. Come on, pull yourself together and be ready to jump."

Scavendal dragged himself to his feet with little whimpering sounds, his eyes tightly shut. The chariot slowed until it was barely moving, and Kedrigern gave his companion a shove onto the sands and then jumped after. No sooner had they landed than the chariot soared up and was lost to sight in an instant.

"Look what you've done!" Scavendal wailed. "There's nothing but desert in every direction. We'll die of thirst or hunger, or we'll be burnt up, or wild beasts will eat us!"

"Calm down. The chariot brought us here, so this is where we ought to be. Let's get moving."

"Where?"

Kedrigern pointed straight ahead. "This way."

THEY TRUDGED ON FOR AN UNKNOWN time, and then they were out of the desert and onto a bleak rocky plateau. The sky darkened. Sullen clouds swirled overhead, and lightning split the air. With no warning, an abyss gaped at their feet, and Scavendal cried out in horror.

"We're all right. There's a bridge across it," Kedrigern said.

"But it's no wider than a hair!"

"Nonsense. It's wide enough for a farm wagon."

"No, no! Can't you see? It's so thin it's barely visible!"

Kedrigern looked again at the broad and sturdy bridge, and then he remembered the motto over the gate. In his calmest and most reassuring voice he said, "The bridge will hold us, believe me. Close your eyes and hang on to my belt. Don't let go. And once we're on the bridge, don't even think of turning back. Keep believing and we'll get across."

Before Scavendal could protest, they were on their way. The bridge went on and on, its farther end lost in mist. The gulf below was dark and terrible. A glance showed Kedrigern what he had suspected: the bridge vanished behind them as they moved. His courage wavered at the sight, and the bridge at once trembled and shrank to little more than a hand's breadth. But he raised his eyes and strode on without faltering. The way firmed and broadened under his feet.

Then they were across, standing on the rim of an enormous valley filled with what appeared to be rocks of all sizes, in heaps and piles, scattered singly or in small clusters, as far as they could see. A bird flew overhead and disappeared into the valley, and Kedrigern

knew that they now had but a little way to go.

A man sat at the head of the downward path. He was seated on a giant sandglass. The sand poured steadily downward, yet did not seem to diminish in the upper portion or to increase in the lower.

The man changed as they approached, one appearance flowing into another, none lasting for long. He became in turn a woman, a golden-haired child, an infant, a creature so wizened and wrinkled and bent that it was bereft of all indication of gender. Once he looked like money, then he was a grim physician, and once he was only a shadow.

"Are you the Guardian?" Kedrigern called.

Now a noble matron, the figure answered, "I am, and you are welcome to the Valley of Lost Time."

"Do we have to solve a riddle, or undergo an ordeal, or anything like that?" Scavendal asked.

"No. The Valley is open to all brave enough to venture here."

"There are dangers, then. Traps. Pitfalls."

"Not in the Valley. The dangers come before and after. All you need do here is take your time."

"But where is it?" Scavendal asked. "I don't see anything but a lot of rocks and pebbles and boulders."

The Guardian, now a young girl, said, "They are not rocks and stones, but clumps of lost time. People believe that they can kill time, but they can only lose it. Some people lose minutes, some lose entire lifetimes. And all the time lost and wasted in the world ends here. You may take what you will, but use it wisely or the price will be high."

"What do you ask in return?"

The Guardian did not speak, but waved them on, down the path into the valley. Their descending footsteps raised clouds of fine dust.

"Seconds," said Kedrigern, stooping and rubbing the dust into his hands. "The pebbles are about an hour each. And that," indicating a large rock, "looks like several weeks of wasted time on the part of a large number of people. The contribution of some political body, no doubt."

He lifted the rock, which weighed no more than a leaf, and it fell to dust in his upraised hands. The dust showered over him in a shimmering cloud, and then was gone. With a deep satisfied sigh, he said, "That was a couple of years, at least. Now I have to find a few wasted lifetimes."

Scavendal tried his hand with a cannonball-sized rock, then struggled to lift a slightly larger one. They seemed much heavier in his hands than in Kedrigern's.

THEY REMAINED IN THE VALLEY FOR what seemed to them a brief time. It was hard to be certain in this place. When they returned to the rim, they found the Guardian a silver-haired man, sound asleep.

"Should we leave something for him?" Scavendal whispered.

Kedrigern shook his head. "We have nothing he wants. Everything comes to him sooner or later."

"If we tip him, maybe he'd help us find our way back."

"No need. According to the map, we're almost there."

"But that's impossible! We've traveled—"

Scavendal fell silent at the sight of the mottled columns and the black gate rising just beyond the edge of the valley, opening now on the wood they had left. They stepped through and found themselves standing ankle-deep in the stream, an oak on either hand, and not a trace of columns or gate.

They stooped to drink and take up water to splash their faces before starting back to their campsite. "Scavendal, you have my profound thanks," Kedrigern said as they walked. "I never expected to find the Valley of Lost Time, but thanks to your map, I've got myself three or four hundred years, and they couldn't have come at a better time."

"Thanks to you, Kedrigern, I've been able to make use of the map at last. Now I have the time I'll need to become a great wizard like you," said Scavendal. Kedrigern maintained a discreet silence. A few centuries of diligent study would help the poor fellow, but for Scavendal to become a great wizard would require millennia. As if he had read his mind, Scavendal went on, "And if centuries aren't enough, I'll go back for more. Next time, I won't be afraid."

"I've never heard of anyone returning."

Scavendal looked at him in disbelief. "But anyone who knows the way to the Valley of Lost Time can live forever!"

"They can, but they don't choose to. Five or six centuries seem to be enough. That old, old sorceress you bought the map from—she didn't go back for more, did she?"

"No, she didn't. But she was so feeble and frail, and had so many aches and pains that she.... She couldn't...." He stopped and looked at Kedrigern with wide astonished eyes.

"Precisely. The Valley of Time isn't the Fountain of Youth. By the time we're five or six hundred years old, we'll *feel* five or six hundred years old. It will take a whole day's magic just to get out of bed in the morning."

Scavendal looked at him crestfallen. "Is that what it all comes to? A lifetime studying magic just so you can get out of bed in the morning?"

"I'm assured that it seems worthwhile at the time."

By now they had reached their campsite. The extinguished campfire still gave off warmth. Kedrigern took up the flask of Vernian's wine and raised it high. "Let's drink to long lives and good magic."

KEDRIGERN AND SCAVENDAL PARTED two days later, and Kedrigern made his way to the cottage on Silent Thunder Mountain alone and in much better spirits than when he had left Vernian's castle. He hummed little tunes, whistled bird calls, and every now and then stopped to smell the flowers.

It felt very good to be alive, with centuries of life ahead of him. He looked forward to that wintry day when Death beckoned, and he merely smiled and said, "There must be some mistake. If you'll just check the roster, like a good chap, I'm sure you'll find they've botched it again." It would be a moment to savor.

His way took him to the great bridge on the River Durdon, where he planned to spend a night at the excellent inn on the farther bank. As he crossed the bridge, he saw a familiar figure approaching at the head of a procession of pale forms. He waved his hand, grinning in anticipation. The dark figure, before returning the salute, looked around cautiously.

"What's the matter, Death?" said Kedrigern, halting at the dark one's side and dismounting. "Not my time yet, is it?"

"Oh, no, no. Nowhere near it, actually," said Death with a hollow laugh. "It's a piece of luck to run into you like this. I have good news."

"Ah. Got an assistant at last, have you?"

"Don't I wish. No, it's about you." Death took him by the arm and steered him aside, saying, "Let's go where we can talk."

"We can talk right here, can't we?"

"I'd rather not have an audience," Death said, leading him to the far side of the bridge, well out of earshot of the long line of wraiths who waited placidly for his return. "It appears that a mistake was made."

Kedrigern adopted an expression of bewildered innocence. "Mistake?"

"You're not scheduled for pickup for centuries to come. Somehow or other, whoever calculated—"

"But you distinctly told me that I had only until the end of winter!"

"Keep your voice down, please. I also told you that the roster was not absolutely final. I know I told you *that*. And now it turns out you won't be on it after all. You should be very happy. Any normal person would be *overjoyed*."

Kedrigern could keep up the farce no longer. He had no desire to tease or gloat. Poor old Death had, after all, done him a good turn, albeit indirectly and unawares. With a broad grin, he said, "I have a confession to make. I've visited the Valley of Lost Time and got myself a few centuries."

"Have you, now? That was very resourceful of you."

"Thanks to you, I was highly motivated."

"Not an easy place to find, that valley."

"I was very fortunate. I met a man with a map."

"You've thrown off all their calculations."

Kedrigern shrugged. "Sorry about that."

"Oh, no need to apologize to *me*. I'm *delighted*. You've created an embarrassment for those uppity head office people." Death chuckled and rubbed his bony hands together in unfeigned delight. "*This* will take them down a peg or two. Oh, I can't *wait* to see their faces when the final list comes out!" Deep inside the dark hood long teeth flashed in a yellowed smile.

A comfortable silence followed. Kedrigern looked at the waiting mob of departed. "Much better behaved than soldiers, aren't they?"

"Oh, my, yes," said Death. "Meek as lambs. It's a pleasure to work with peasants and townspeople."

"Plague keeps you hopping, I imagine."

"Not a minute to myself. I'm run ragged. I'll be back here every day for the next month. Twice on some days. It's just rush, rush, rush."

"Well, don't let me hold you up," said Kedrigern. "And don't worry about my saying anything to anyone." He held out his hand.

"Very good of you," said Death, taking the hand in a cold bony grip.

"And I do appreciate your letting me know."

"I felt that I owed you a favor. Something to make up for those...those previous clerical errors."

"You've repaid me handsomely."

"And you've done me a service. A *great* service." Death took up its scythe, which it had leaned against the parapet. "It's back to work for me. I imagine you're on your way home now."

"Yes. I thought I'd stop at Gastolf's inn. You haven't taken him or any of his staff, have you?"

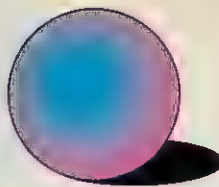
"Not a single one. They're a healthy lot. Well, *bon appétit*, and all that. Don't suppose I'll be seeing you again for quite a while," said Death, starting toward the waiting queue of spirits. A short way off, it turned and called back over its shoulder, "Next time you see Scavendal, wish him luck with his studies."

The dark figure headed toward the pale throng on the far side of the bridge. Kedrigern paused with his hand half raised in a last wave. He stood frozen for several seconds, then he burst into laughter, partly of relief, partly of amusement, partly of embarrassment at being so well and truly outfoxed.

"I will. I surely will," he called to the retreating figure.

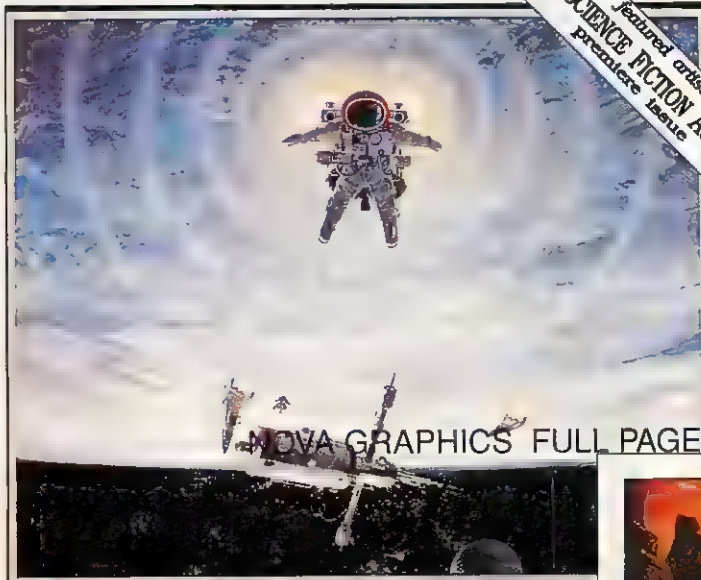
Death did not reply, or turn around. But without breaking stride, it raised its scythe in a single playful flourish of acknowledgment. □

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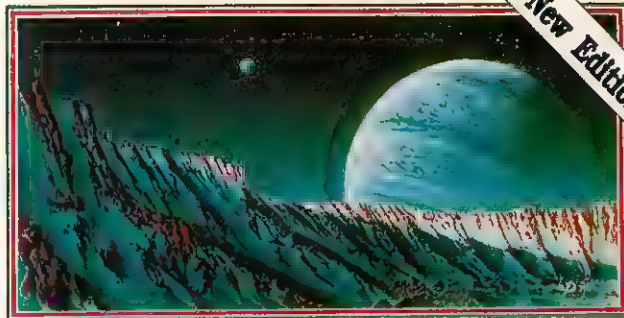
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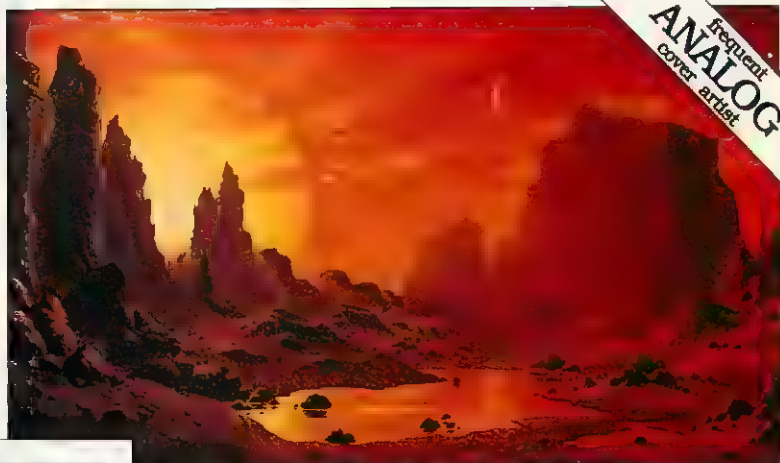


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The premiere writer of Hard SF
celebrates the astronomical
masterworks of Bob Eggleton.

A LYRICAL HARDNESS

BY GREGORY BENFORD



ABOVE: The cover for *Dark Harvest's* Fifty Years of Fritz Leiber encapsulated the mood of this master of SF, fantasy and horror. RIGHT: When we finally get to Mars, perhaps it will be as majestic as Eggleton's cover art for Allen Steele's *Labyrinth of Night*.



Between writers and artists strums a tension stretched by both envy and admiration. Bob Eggleton brings that out in me, maybe more than any other contemporary illustrator of the fantastic.

After all, artists seem to have it so easy. In a single flash of vision they can show you a whole world, a situation, color and form and precise detail all arriving at once in the eye.

He renders a huge red giant star being gravitationally stripped of its envelope by a hot, small star (too blue to be a white dwarf, so probably an oddity kindled into virulent glow by that serpentine tongue of in-falling mass). Every scientific nuance is there. We see the small star's brilliance in the furthest turn of spiraling matter,



while the red giant's power reflects from the other side of the descending gyre. We can place it all in perspective—a human rocky, rutted plain, so we get the distances right immediately—and pause to wonder at the strangely-lit world hanging quietly at the lower right edge. All this in a mere shaved second.

But there's more the artist can command. All the enigmatic turns and aspects he can simply *show*, rendering up murky mysteries, shifted perspectives, dizzy surrealistic overlaps of the hard-edged and the fuzzy, all working together at the same instant of discovery. Tiny humans confront immense pale aliens. They conjure up memories of snails writ large and monstrous. Against a framing landscape, with eerie mushrooms in a blue, cool mist.

Drama, too, can hang before you in that frozen instant, and you get all of it at once. A human coasts toward two feral-looking aliens, who seem poised, wondering what to do—all the while an other land-

scape beyond opens to obscurely tilted perspectives. Where are we?

Of course, closer inspection reveals more—cunning details tucked in here, obscure jokes provoking a smile there. Iguanas and Nazis? The whiff of Eggleton having fun with a commercial assignment.

So though you come to each work in that splash of recognition, time rewards further study. The piece can take its languid moments to work on you, as you puzzle out the disc-shaped spaceship passing by stretched trunks of trees, vast woody things set aloft by what seems a combing wind. The world ringed by lumpy matter in the intermediate distance provokes more riddles than it can possibly answer. What's the story here?

More than once I've picked up a book because I wanted to follow that age-old lure: *what happened next?*—and discovered that it was, of course, an Eggleton. Cover artists learn the arts of enticement, or they move on.



It is very different for writers. We are forced to come at you ponderously, serially, and at a pace dictated by your reading speed, your wandering attention (turn off that television, we want to scream—but can't), and your fitful urge to do all the mental labor that converts these squiggles on the page into (reasonably) intelligible thoughts.

Consider Eggleton's painting of starships maneuvering, one spraying blue fire at an Earthlike planet, while beyond, the galactic plane seethes with orange energy toward the core. There is movement, drama, spectacle. To capture a fraction of the interest that this single quick image conjures up, poor Greg Bear in *Anvil of Stars* had to labor mightily. The reader has to read through descriptions—*we were pushing to deltas and cruising close formation, while the whole galaxy shimmered in our exhaust wash*—to get even close. Eggleton gives us that with a detailed vision, a lyrical hardness.

Anyone can browse through the entire life's work of our best artists (of whom Eggleton is certainly one) in an hour—and emerge refreshed, stretched, informed and charmed. To catch up with even moderately productive writers takes weeks, maybe months, of unstinting plowing through thickets of words, words, words. Artists have it so *easy*....

Of course, we writers do have our advantages. We can set up a pace, energy and drive that make the term "page-turner" mean something. We can run through the full range of suspense, humor, dash and color in our sprawling, roomy novels. Artists have to concentrate, to say much through implication that we can (literally) spell out. I suspect that freedom to grasp the reader by the lapels





*FAR LEFT: George Zebrowski's "Behind the Stars" told of a giant asteroid capable of sustaining human life. ABOVE: Humanity confronts the alien in H. G. Wells's *The First Men in the Moon*. An edition featuring Eggleton's illustrations in color and black and white was published by The Donning Company. LEFT: The human race's longing for the discovery of unknown worlds was captured in this cover for Greg Bear's *Anvil of Stars*.*



LEFT: When Robert J. Sawyer sent intelligent dinosaurs into space in *Foreigner*, Eggleton painted their portraits. RIGHT: Eggleton's cover for the Dann/Dozois anthology *Dragons*!

and spew out our worldviews causes some of us to lecture, pontificate, play coy—and maybe even explains why our books have been getting longer and longer as the genre matures. Fortunately, artists have only the limits of their one rectangle in which to work their magic. Such constraints impose examples of excellence we writers could well learn from.

Matters aren't totally clean-cut, though. What's that baffling smile on the apparently puzzled dinosaur who is somehow suspended above twin worlds? There's much character implied there. Are the crisp particulars of the flying dragon, newly emergent from its egg, a wry comment on Michael Whelan's famous depictions? Are Eggleton's whales, seen both above and under the water, a reflection on a similarly named artist, the highly commercial Wyland, who so often juxtaposes sea life and astronomical images? There is a subtlety and commentary working beyond the immediate effect in these, an implied theory of illustration, maybe even a bit of tangy gossip.

I've always thought of Bob as an astronomical painter in the tradition of Chesley Bonestell, the great original talent who dominated the field in the first half of this century. He has a certainty of dramatic effect, combined with scrupulous attention to the latest astronomical information, which Bonestell made his hallmark. I was

happy to get Eggleton covers on two of my books, the exploration novels *Jupiter Project* and *Against Infinity*. He got the colors of Jupiter's atmospheric bands and swirls exactly right, relying on NASA true-color photos, and insisting that the paintings be as accurate as possible.

God is in the details, a philosopher once said. The result was covers I could live with as a scientist and enjoy as a writer, for they conveyed the gritty, hard-edged feel I wanted to evoke in the novels themselves. To write about our solar system has always seemed to me a demanding task, requiring a firm knowledge of what looks technically plausible. Could Jupiter's moons be colonized? Why would people go there? How would they survive? In Eggleton's carefully thought-through designs, we see the machines which could make that possible. And a looming, icy beauty that makes its own argument for going, seeing, staying.

But there's more to him than that, of course. This gallery displays some of his range, but you have to prowl the bookstores to see it all, scanning the titles for that crisp yet dramatic look that is his signature. He can grab you in that frozen instant when a painting makes its claim on you, draws you in, and maybe even sells you the book on the strength of his vision.

Writers depend on artists to do that first, essential job for them. Ideally, one *should* be able to judge a book by its cover—or else what's it there for? So between writers and artists there is no intrinsic competition. We do different jobs for the reader. The artist gets to do his first.

From a legion of artists that includes Bonestell, Rick Sternbach, Don Dixon, Donald Davis and many more, Bob Eggleton does the job, and does it with a dash and detail others can only envy. □

Life is discovered on another planet in George Zebrowski's story "In the Distance and Ahead in Time."



With a roll of the dice, *Metascape* provides superior space opera thrills.



Some of the motley crew of aliens you can choose either to be—or to fight. Art by Mark Maxwell.

IDEALLY, THIS REVIEW SHOULD START WHERE *METASCAPE: Guild Space* (Dream Quest Games, Ltd., 1993) does, trying to explain the *Metascape* dice system. Unfortunately, it takes the people who designed the game 12,000 words just to explain the dice, and I only have a sixth as many words to explain the whole game. I will have to explain the dice system at some point because it contains most of the game's best ideas. For instance, in *Metascape*, the game master never has to roll any dice. The players, see, throw two dice for each roll and...no, sorry. I can't face it. Let's start with something simple and work our way up to the dice.

There are three basic genres of role-playing games. The first, and still the most popular, is medieval fantasy, represented by TSR's *Dungeons and Dragons*. The third, and always a distant third at that, is contemporary spies, represented by HERO Games' *Danger International*. The second, holding its own in the middle, is far future space opera, represented by GDW's *Traveller*. *Metascape: Guild Space* fits snugly into this second group, so space opera that I can't call it science fiction. To enter the Guild Space universe is to adventure not so much with the Louis Wus and the Hari Seldons, as among the Lensmen and (particularly) the Luke Skywalkers.

When we sat down to play the game, I had to explain the universe of Guild Space to my friends. I told them that besides Anthropos (humans) there were five non-human races they could play: the Zin-Shee (a cat race), the Draca (a lizard race), the Kryll (an insect race), the Calemora (psychosomatic martial artists), and the Shanask (wraith-like sorcerers).

These six races are all members or allies of the Guild,

a democratic collection of worlds which are bounded by a number of other political groups, most notably the pirate kingdom called the Dark Alliance, the high technology Arthirian Sphere, and the expansionistic Empire. The characters play members of the House of Dha, the commando arm of the Guild Armed Forces. Within the House (all branches of the Guild Armed Forces are called houses; the navy, for instance, is called the House Defiance), the characters choose a chapter (bio warrior, cyber warrior, marine, rogue, warlock, etc.) that determines their special abilities and skills. Normally, having gotten this far in a game, it would be time to explain the dice system and put the players to work rolling up their characters. In *Metascape*, however, there is almost no rolling involved in creating the characters. Weirdly, what rolling there is reserved for the character's age, height, weight and life span. Every other statistic, skill, power, piece of gear, and handicap is purchased. Nor is this purchasing a short process. There are 17 statistics (four mental, four physical, and five combat, plus three sciences and luck), none of which are figured from the others and all of which must be improved individually.

Don't let me make character generation sound scarier than it actually is. First of all, the base scores in the 17 statistics are set at the racial averages, so that even if you spent no points on character improvement, you would be no worse off than the average non-player character you will be encountering. Second of all, this is a space opera future. If there is anything you can't afford to have your character do innately, then you can buy a machine (or a bio machine or magic artifact or a psionic focus) to do it for you. In other words, it is hard to mess up buying your character.

Having said that, this is probably the time to say that it is also hard to mess up at all in *Metascape*. This is not a game in the mode of *SPI*, or BTRC's *TimeLords*. There is no attempt to portray reality as we experience it. There is an effort to remain consistent within the game itself, but the only "natural laws" are those of the genre.

Which brings us to the dice. *Metascape* uses six-sided, eight-sided, and ten-sided dice, the results of which are then multiplied by a 16-sided doubling die which has six 1's, four 2's, two 4's, one 8, and one 16, plus a 't' and a 'c'. It is actually more complex just rolling the dice and multiplying since (depending on what sort of roll is needed) the results are found on one of three charts, each with the values doubled from the one below it. The 'c' on the doubling die moves the results to a different chart while the 't' moves the decimal place of the result. Sixteens are re-rolled, with the second result added to the first, and if another 16 is rolled, then the player rolls again, for as long as the 16s continue. Results of one or less and 100 or more are considered critical and may have special effects.

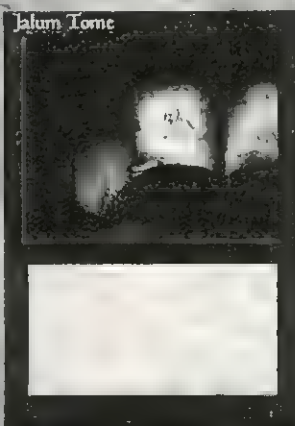
Running my friends through the introductory scenario provided the strangest evening of game mastering I have ever experienced. We played for four hours and I never

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Finally, a word about *Metascape* in the real world. For \$5.00 you can register yourself, and for \$8.00 you can register your club with Game Lords, Ltd. This entitles you to membership cards, an entry on the national data base, and special privileges in designing expansion cards and ordering products. It also qualifies you to apply for one of the

• If there's one thing that gamers need, it's guns, and that's why Maryann Siembieda put together *The Compendium of Contemporary Weapons* (Palladium Books, trade paperback, 176 pages, \$19.95). The information provided, good for use with all role-playing game systems, covers hundreds of weapons from revolvers, pistols and rifles through mortars, grenade launchers and flamethrowers. All modern weapons, combat vehicles, equipment, and accessories used by military and law enforcement agencies throughout the world are included. Each weapon is fully illustrated, with all statistics necessary for a game master to introduce each piece into any scenario in a modern, post modern, or military setting. Due to the controversial nature of gun ownership in this country, the author is quick to note that parental discretion is to be used when judging if the volume is appropriate for young children, and also mentions that the volume is not meant as a survivalist's handbook or a pro-civil arms statement. However, for those who are already fans of RPG, Siembieda's volume is a useful tool.

BOOKS

Continued from page 16

Guardians in place by book's end, ready to use the stones (whose origin, level of sentience and intentions remain shrouded) as they see fit, perhaps Cross will escalate the engagement of his characters with the larger world they have mostly ignored in this first volume, simultaneously upping the so far rather petty stakes which have dominated the tale in its initial stages.

With a writer of Cross's talents, I wouldn't bet against it.

Paul Di Filippo

RECENT & RECOMMENDED

•Don Webb is unique, a fact to which anyone who has read his stories in this magazine can attest. His vision of the world is skewed in a way that keeps his readers pleasantly off balance. Webb's newest short story collection, *The Seventh Day and After* (Wordcraft of Oregon, signed limited trade paperback, 78 pages, \$7.95) is further proof of the writer's bizarre brain. The limited edition book contains seven stories, a play, and one poem, all dedicated to pushing the envelope of what a story can do. "The Protocols of Captain Whizzo," told in the form of a smuggled transcript of a top-secret meeting, lets us in on what is really behind insipid childrens television shows and their tooth-rotting cereals. "Gladsome Yule" has a red-suited Santa suddenly aiding his anagrammatic, red-skinned counterpart, Satan. "Beach Scene," the volume's play, starts out with just a couple of old men sitting around talking, but soon develops into something deadly. Webb's topsy-turvy visions in this volume are definitely not for children, but those with open (and resilient) minds will find plenty to appreciate.

•Lovers of literature outside of our genre have often paid special attention to regionalism, that is, writing that comes from and speaks of the South, or New York, or any other particular region where writers have clustered. Science fiction has long focused on different sorts of regions, such as outer space and inner space, paying rare attention to earthly regional voices. That has started to change with recent anthologies devoted to such subjects as Newer York and Future Boston. Now it is time for the Intermountain West, that narrow corridor stretching from Alberta to Sonora, which includes Utah. *Washed by a Wave of Wind: Science Fiction from the Corridor* (Signature Books, trade paperback, 400 pages, \$18.95) brings together short stories from almost every one of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America who lives (or has ever lived) in Utah, as well as the first published efforts of newcomers to the genre. The more familiar names from among the 20 authors included here are Orson Scott Card, Dave Wolverton, Elizabeth H. Boyer and D. William Shunn. □



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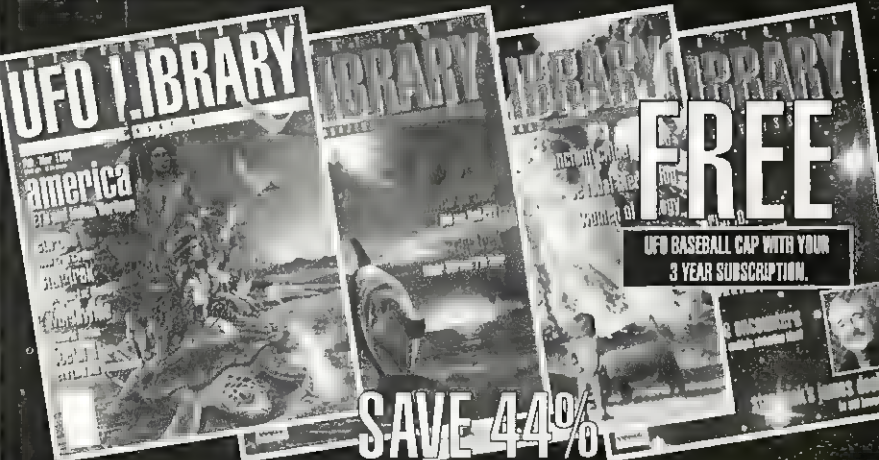
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THE BIOMANTIC

Continued from page 58

"Take a good look, Octoff," she said cheerfully, but before she could fire again, the floor rose up around her shoulders in a great bulge of muscular flesh. Her eyes grew wide. Her gun hand was forced up, so that her next burst sent splinters into the shuddering ceiling.

A long pseudopod dropped from above and snatched the splinter gun away. Another dropped down and wrapped about her head. Boneless fingers worried at the latches of her helmet until it came off.

The roiling of the floor slowly stopped.

He picked up the pinbeam and waded through the remains of the dwarf.

"Fun's fun," Lanilla said in a quivering voice. "But now I want you to tell your friend to behave." Octoff felt the collar give him a cautionary squeeze.

He saw that she had regained her self-control and her cunning. He felt a deep sadness. How could he have ever been so pathetically desperate as to believe her promises? "Whatever you want," he said, and swept the pinbeam through her neck.

HE AWOKE, AND IN THAT FIRST MOMENT HE was without memory. Then his hand went to his throat. He found the ring of smooth pseudo-skin that covered his neck. Beauty put me back together, he thought with mild astonishment. The proscription against meddling with human flesh had finally worn down, it appeared. Then he remembered what he had done to Lanilla.

"Burn bomb," he muttered, trying to rise. Hands held him carefully down, and he opened his eyes to see one of Beauty's dwarves. The dwarf's tiny black eyes were placid; Octoff didn't see the accusation he expected.

"Beauty?" Octoff hoped the dwarf could speak. He felt a terrible urgency. How long had he been dead? When was Lanilla's next comm deadline?

"Yes," the dwarf said in a rough, harsh voice. "Yes, this is Beauty. The poem speaks for me now. Until I can make a new Speaker."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't blame yourself, Octoff. It really wasn't your fault, not at all. What else could you have done. She was a dangerous, treacherous creature. I'm glad you trusted me instead."

He needed to tell Beauty that he must leave. As much as he regretted her imminent destruction, still he had to get away, or perish with her under the burn bomb. His mind served up a succession of horrible images: the first eye-searing flash of the bomb, the writhing of the great manse under the consuming energies, the death of all that loveliness. The ancient gardens, the beloved fields, the wild beauty of the jungles. His eyes filled. He remembered the way he had

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felt after the drug, how much he had loved. "Beauty," he sobbed, "the burn bomb. How long?"

"Hush," said the dwarf, its small crude face immobile. "Don't fret. Look." It gestured at the chameleon screen, and Octoff realized he lay in Old Husband's observation post.

The screen swirled with shadow; then coalesced into an image. He seemed to see Lanilla Silda, dressed in a high-necked robe, sitting before her collection of comm gear.

As he watched, the chime sounded, and she put her eye to the scanner to receive the green flash of acceptance. Lanilla's face was calm, resigned. The conversation was short. When she had finished, she stood.

She was much too tall, and Octoff's eyes dropped to the hem of her robe, which revealed the gaunt legs of a toad creature, gray and warty. She looked directly at Octoff, and he shrank back in the chair. She smiled, and it was a strangely sweet smile. She raised the toad creature's hand in greeting, or benediction. The screen darkened.

For a moment he was still. Then he smiled too.

THREE DAYS LATER, AFTER BEAUTY HAD assured him the exercise would not make his head fall off, Octoff went to the courtyard where Lanilla had parked her landwalker. He thought about Selevand Center, remembering old pleasures there, wondering what new ones he might find. The dwarf moved at his back.

When he saw the landwalker he made a sound of disbelief.

"What is it, Octoff?" The dwarf's tone was solicitous.

Octoff gestured at the wrecked vehicle. Its legs were twisted and broken, its ports shattered, its circuitry and hydraulic systems pulled out and festooned in glittering tangles over the dented hulk. "Why?"

"I was angry with Husband and all that belonged to her." Her voice lightened. "Besides, it doesn't matter. Don't you want to be my New Husband?"

"Yes," he whispered, staring at the ruin of the landwalker. He thought about the vast jungle that surrounded the Biomantic's domain, the jungle no unprotected human could survive. "Yes...." He turned away and looked out across his new kingdom. He tried to smile and after a moment the smile came more easily.

For some reason he thought of the bubble woman, the one that had contained Beauty's essence. In his memory, her face had begun to resemble Lanilla's.

I AM CONTENT WITH NEW HUSBAND; HE has much potential. I think he is not quite so pleased with me. But we will have a long time together, now that I have evolved beyond my original parameters and can work with human tissue. I will bury no more Husbands.

We will grow close, so close .□

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Welcome a new age of comic books thanks to the latest SF invasion.



SF's own Rachel Pollack re-energizes *Doom Patrol*—one of comics' oldest and weirdest super-groups.

THE INFLUENCE OF SCIENCE FICTION ON COMIC books has been a long and productive one, almost as long as the history of comics itself, stretching back to the origin of *Superman* in 1938. Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the Man of Steel's creators, were involved in early SF fandom, as was influential editor Julius Schwartz, who had a long career with DC Comics. Writers such as Edmond Hamilton, Eando Binder and Gardner Fox were drawn from the science fiction pulps to script comics in the '40s and '50s. Currently active big name authors such as Harlan Ellison, Samuel Delany, Harry Harrison and George Alec Effinger all have comic book work hiding somewhere on their resumé (as does *Science Fiction Age* editor Scott Edelman, who scripted such cosmic heroes as *Captain Marvel* and *Omega* back in the '70s).

There's no doubting that comics have helped spread the influence of SF—for better or worse, providing a medium through which many fresh young minds first receive science fiction. For me, it was comics like *The*

Fantastic Four and *The Avengers* which gave me my first taste of the big SF ideas. Jack Kirby and artists following his lead gave me visions of galaxy-wide alien empires and inter-dimensional portals, forever reshaping the landscape of my imagination and leaving me hungry for further exploration.

Currently there's space in the comic book publishing scene for more sophisticated and mature comics. This, combined with a fondness for comics dating back to childhood, may well be enough to explain why many well-known science fiction authors have been enticed to take a shot at comic book scripts.

Larry Niven—a favorite of many readers, especially in the hard SF camp, thanks to *Ringworld* and other bestsellers—has become involved with *Green Lantern*, one of DC Comics' most obviously science fictional heroes, dealing in outer space adventures and aliens aplenty. Niven was brought in to revamp *Green Lantern's* background "bible," and out of that work grew the story *Ganthet's Tale*. He teamed up with comic book fan favorite John Byrne to create a 60-page minigraphic novel (a graphic novella?) which reworks the mythos of the Guardians—the aliens who provide the Lantern's power—handily connecting the beginning of the universe to the entropic death of the universe.

Niven brings a number of more sophisticated than usual cosmological concepts to the *Green Lantern* story, and he deftly uses layers of stories within stories to unravel the mystery and build to a twist ending. Despite the extra complexity, this is still seeped in the innocent fun intrinsic to the goofy "green" powers of this comic book hero. In keeping with that, John Byrne delivers prime superhero artwork, integrating the best of the past greats such as Jack Kirby and Gil Kane into a seamless and charming visual narrative, spanning great vistas of space and time effortlessly.

We can come back down to Earth by taking a look at *Doom Patrol* (monthly from DC's Vertigo line), regularly scripted by science fiction author Rachael Pollack. She produced SF novels in relative obscurity for at least a decade, until recently winning the prestigious British Arthur C. Clarke Award for *Unquenchable Fire*. She's also written unique nonfiction works, including *A Practical Guide to Fortune Telling*.

Doom Patrol may be more "down-to-Earth," but it is very much off-the-wall. It's a quirky, always surprising take-off on the traditional superhero teams. Definitely written for adults, it touches on issues of sexuality, identity, and isolation, just to name a few. The oddball characters include Robotman, whose personality software has been down-loaded and bootlegged by cyberpunks; Dorothy, a decidedly ugly little girl who has the power to make her imaginary friends become real; a talking doll with the head of a harlequin and the body of a teddy bear; and the group's leader, Professor Calder, who is nothing more than a talking head sitting in a tray of ice!

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a little patience and faith in the author, *Doom Patrol* is highly recommended. Often the tone is one of a whimsical but melancholy fairy tale, with the lines between reality, imagination, and dreams being crossed all the time. Pollack often uses this format to reach out and touch disturbing buttons.

Only slightly lower on a scale of bizarreness is the four-issue miniseries *Mister E*, scripted by the highly-respected author K.W. Jeter. In science fiction Jeter is known for the startling novel of extremities *Dr. Adder*, and other works, including *The Glass Hammer* and the steampunk *Infernal Devices*.

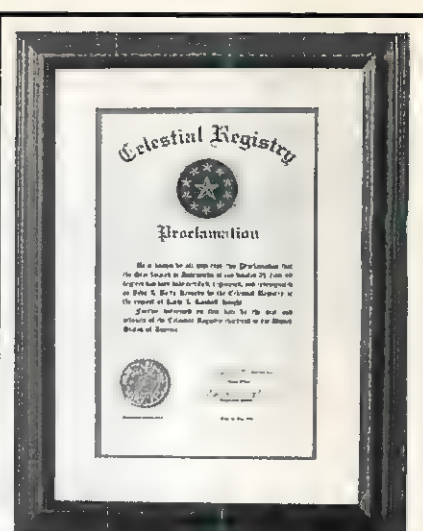
Jeter is certainly a writer from whom we expect the strange and disturbing, and in *Mister E* he delivers, pushing comics toward the outer limits of abstraction and surreal psychological symbolism. In this he is greatly assisted by the dynamic, pulsing layouts of penciler John K. Snyder III. On a grand scale, leaping across voids of time and space, we get another twist on the deconstruction of the traditional hero, tying in here with psycho-sexual drives and extremes of child abuse. *Mister E* travels a long way from the world of the average comic book.

Those desiring lighter fare might want to turn to *TekWorld* (monthly from Marvel Comics), a comic series based on the best-selling William Shatner-penned novels. Long-time science fiction writer Ron Goulart has just finished an 18-issue run on *TekWorld*, a portion of which has been rereleased in graphic novel format under the same name. Goulart is known for tongue-in-cheek takes on SF adventure pulp stories: he's authored numerous novels with titles like *Daredevils LTD* and *Spacehawk Inc.* He also had a hand in helping Shatner put together the original Tek novels.

Set in a near future of addictive technology, *TekWorld* is chock full of slam-bam "sci-fi" adventure, more in the tradition of big screen Hollywood action movies than science fiction prose literature. There is little of the trademark Goulart humor, but the author does a very good job of coming up with non-stop twists and turns in the plot, very much in the hard-boiled detective tradition. This comic might have particular appeal for younger readers looking for heavy-duty action combined with the polished gloss of high-tech hardware.

For a more mature, engrossing look at the near future, check out Lewis Shiner's work on the 12-issue *The Hacker Files*. As the best cyberpunk work done in comics, it's well worth hunting down.

Joe Lansdale's work in comics takes us from the future to the past, to a pair of decidedly weird Westerns. Lansdale is a cult favorite in horror fiction, but he is also highly regarded by the SF community for his wild imagination. He has had work published within our genre, such as the novels *The Drive-In* and *The Drive-In II*. Just about anything Lansdale does is worth checking out, although it often requires a strong stomach.



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Lansdale took on the most memorable of the comic book gunslingers, DC's *Jonah Hex*, in a recently completed five-part story called "Two Gun Mojo." With eye-catching art by Timothy Truman and vivid color, this one seems destined to be reprinted as a snazzy graphic novel. Truman's art, with its fine detail and dramatic layout and pacing, is always a pleasure to look at, even when he's depicting ghastly, gruesome scenes. Lansdale gives him plenty of those scenes to work on, as Hex—a burned, scarred, hypercynical anti-hero—deals with black magic, zombies, and frontier massacres. The writer has a great time laying out an amoral, violent and ruthless Wild West.

These elements get pushed to even greater extremes in *Dead in the West* (two 50-page black-and-white books from Dark Horse), an adaptation of a Lansdale story, scripted by award-winning SF author Neal Barrett Jr. and drawn by underground comic pioneer Jack Jackson. This is a very scary and disturbing story, which adds incest, torture, and religious fanaticism to the zombies-on-the-frontier scenario. It details the fall of a town with evil secrets. A gun toting, traveling preacher tortured by sex-guilt plays the hero at the center of the action.

Neal Barrett Jr. readers should keep an eye out for other Dark Horse comics featuring his work. Currently he is scripting *Out of the Vortex*, part of Dark Horse's recently created superhero universe, "Comics Greatest World." It's vastly different from his work on the disquieting *Dead in the West*. *Vortex* is packed with UFOs, superpowered aliens, and threats of Armageddon. With a cosmic mythos in the Jack Kirby mode and colorful artwork in a classic, larger-than-life superhero style, this makes for youthful comic book fun wherever you pick up in the story line.

Based on advance publicity, a new teen-aged Superheroine named *Anima* (monthly from Vertigo) should be worth checking out, especially because it features the work of up-and-coming SF writer Elizabeth Hand. With the novels *Aestival Tide* and *Winterlong*, she has gained a powerful reputation for her lush, evocative writing style and sophisticated take on science fiction ideas. This new comic promises an ambitious mix of grunge rock culture, topical issues and horrific imagery drawn from Jungian psychology. It will be interesting to see how Hand's rich voice and imagination translates into the graphics-dominated comic book pages.

Surely many more science fiction-based authors will drift in and out of the comic book market in the years to come. These writers can add perspectives and storytelling techniques not generally found in comics, along with an outsider's ability to take risks and experiment with nontraditional ideas. The graphic power of the medium pours new vitality into time-worn ideas, firing up the imaginations of generations of comics and SF readers to come. □

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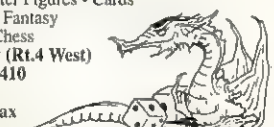
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THE BIGGER ONE

Continued from page 69

ARON: Hold on! It's over the top.
MERKLE: Look, it's going on toward the Salton Sea. Maybe that'll draw it away from us.

ARON: Hope so. Hey, you feel that?

MERKLE: The van's moving.

ARON: These currents are eroding the sand. If this dune gives—

MERKLE: It's creeping up my legs. Hold me!

ARON: No place nearby to swim to, even if we could make it against the flow.

ANNOUNCER: Pamela, our chopper pilot reports thick clouds, apparently from seawater evaporating as it strikes the hot desert. He can't see through them.

MERKLE: Oh, great. I hope this dune is as high as sea level. That'll save us, won't it?

ARON: The water's still going like crazy, see? It'll run north of the Salton Sea for sure, maybe to Indio.

MERKLE: What'll we do if this sand gives way?

ARON: Find something that floats. But I don't think it's getting any higher.

MERKLE: It's up to my knees! At least it's warm.

ARON: And salty. I was thinking...

MERKLE: Hold me tight. Did the van move just now?

ARON: No, I did. Trying to see up toward the north. The dust is thinning out. Y'know, this water will reach pretty far.

MERKLE: I, I think it's slacking.

ARON: After things calm down, maybe we can swim to one of those hills over there.

MERKLE: Let's survive first. Just survive.

Watery sounds fade.

ANNOUNCER (somber): What a tragedy, a genuine tragedy...vast loss of life...awful...

(Switching to crisp, factual): We'll return to the site in a moment. Meanwhile, speculation has already begun that the ocean flooding will cover several hundred square miles, killing more people than the earthquake itself.

However, experts point out that formation of a new bay extending as far north as Indio will produce several hundred miles of fresh California coastline. An inland sea!

The prospect of such an economic bonanza may help overcome the grief this monstrous event has brought. Tragic, yes—but part of nature's plan, perhaps, for our great land.

(Brisk tone): What will this mean for our economy? New opportunities, to be sure. Less agriculture, but greater tourism. Sunny beaches, sailing, and—as soon as the water settles down—no doubt some terrific sport fishing.

(Chuckles warmly): We now go to our real estate correspondent, always first with the fresh point of view, standing in the hills above the flooding.... □

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DOWN ON THE 01 LEVEL

Continued from page 49

to the back of my mind and smiled, saying, "It's worth the risk." We tipped glasses.

For the next two breaks, Riga taught me about the old-time blues. And I learned that the bar itself was named for a famous blues singer from the last century. It was all very interesting, and I enjoyed watching her talk, maintaining that kind of haunting tone even when her voice grew more animated. Her life was, indeed, the blues. But I still wondered about the personal element that'd caused her so much pain, for she occasionally drifted off, obviously recalling something sad...

The evening was growing short, and I asked about the possibility of her getting off early. She understood my desire to be alone with her, but still she remained kind of vague, suggesting that maybe she could arrange it in the future.

On her last break, I said, "I would like to see you again. But you need to see me, the real me. I'm not anything like this, you know." I indicated the McQueen persona.

She smiled wryly and said cryptically, "Perhaps neither of us are what we seem." Then added: "Maybe tomorrow we can leave early, get better acquainted, if you want."

I nodded, stood, and replied, "I'll be here early. But now I must go."

She stood, took my hand, and led me back toward the stage. "There's a shortcut down the alley out this way."

Outside in the alley, I kissed her softly, then more passionately, finally drawing away as the heat of her body began to excite me. I knew she could feel my arousal. I was charged with desire, but tugged away. "I must leave, get back, turn in the simsuit."

She moved away to the door, saying, "Goodbye, Sandoval."

HURRYING BACK TO THE PERSONA SHOP area, I slowed as I neared *Outside Vid Stars of The Past*, noticing the two black-clad Companymen loitering on the walkway, both appearing to be searching the crowd that was going in and out of the shops. Were they looking for someone in particular? Me? Or Oberon, maybe? I didn't know, but I figured if they were looking for me, they'd be searching the crowd for Steve McQueen. I hit the power on my backpack, my persona blinking out, then hurried by the lawmen, who did indeed seem to be searching for someone specific.

But I made it into the shop without being apprehended, and I slipped out of the deactivated simsuit before leaving through the back of the shop, and working my way cautiously to the alley and transporter booth.

OBERON WAS STILL NOT HOME, NOT ANSWERING her vidphone. Where was she? What had happened?

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Sitting alone in my conapt I began to worry about her welfare. It was true she often disappeared for a few days, but after bobbing? Maybe she'd been picked up by the Companymen down on 01. And after the last two experiences, I knew it was growing more and more dangerous to bob back. But I also knew I couldn't resist the attraction of Riga Maroux and the implicit promise of tomorrow. Still I had to do something. I'd check the persona shop, see if Oberon had been back yesterday. Also I'd look in at the *House Of The Rising Sun*.

I fell into a troubled sleep, eventually dreaming of the ill-fated bobber in Riga's song. I awoke with a start, feeling a strange sense of... of precognition. For I knew without a doubt that I was being set up by someone. The Companymen on 01 were trying to catch me. But who would do such a thing? And why? Kinjo was probably vindictive enough, but he didn't know about the Steve McQueen persona. There seemed to be only one likely suspect, the person who had intentionally delayed me *twice*.

Riga Maroux!

And she did seem kind of secretive, like she was hiding something. But I just couldn't accept her as a suspect. I didn't believe she could betray me, especially after last night's promise of intimacy. And despite everything, I knew I *had* to see her again.

AFTER I PICKED UP MY MCQUEEN persona, the clerk checked on Oberon. She had *not* turned in her simsuit two nights ago or last night. I hoped she remembered the five hour limited wear.

A little later I discovered she had *not* sung last night at the Rising Sun. I was indeed worried. Maybe Riga could help me locate Oberon. Or could suggest something.

When I entered the club, the stage was dark and empty. Riga was sitting at the bar. She smiled as I slipped onto a stool.

"I got the night off," she said simply.

My pulse raced.

She stared at me directly with her metallic eyes. "I've rented us a room not far from here. But I need to explain something you don't know about me, Sandoval. You see..." She paused, apparently at a loss for words.

I took her hand. "It's okay," I said, "you don't have to tell me now."

THE ROOM WAS SIMPLE AND PLAIN, THE only decoration a full-length mirror by the door.

I moved closer and kissed her gently, wrapping my arms around her back—

I felt the card-sized powerpack. "What's this?" I asked, my tone a mix of confusion and anger.

"That's what I want to explain," Riga said, her voice thick with melancholy. "I'm from this Level, you see, but obviously I'm not what I appear to be. I am hiding behind this persona—"

SCIENCE FICTION AGE

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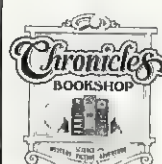
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The door to the little room crashed open, and my startled gaze was locked on the two black-clad Companymen.

"No," I said incredulously, shifting my gaze to Riga. She had betrayed me, I thought. *She* was the one all along.

Reading my disappointed look and the accusation in my eyes, Riga shook her head, glancing at the lawmen.

One of the Companymen announced, "You are both under arrest," and he made a movement with his hand, adding, "and entitled to confront your accuser." A Tattletale blinked into existence, a head shimmering in the dim light.

It was Oberon! I had forgotten all about her after seeing Riga.

"I'm sorry, Sandoval," she said, as the Companymen slipped stuns over our heads. "I was caught in a roundup that first night. Apparently there really are a number of new cases of Frost on this Level. I had to give them your description, and possible whereabouts, so they could track you down."

I looked back at Riga. She had not turned me in.

But then *what* could she be hiding? What was under her disguise? I glanced again at the shimmering hologram of Oberon, her declaration registering on my consciousness. *Frost!*

Oh, no, I thought, not Riga.

One of the Companymen was reaching behind her to deactivate her persona. I squeezed my eyes shut, afraid of what I'd see.

But, unable to resist, I finally blinked and looked on the real countenance of Riga Maroux.

I gasped because the face was *not* frosted. No, indeed. Riga Maroux's features were completely healthy...for a *man*!

I stood there almost in shock...then I remembered the cautionary words of Riga's "Bobber Blues." *I* was going to be judged, dyed blue, and cast out into the wasteland. Oh, not me, I thought, my heart thumping against my ribs like a bird trying to escape a cage.

The Companyman next to me stepped close and clicked off my McQueen persona—

"Oh, no—" Riga whispered, looking at me with round, horrified eyes, apparently unable to say more.

What was wrong?

I took a step toward the mirror near the door and stared at my reflection, unable to restrain a shudder and gasp of disbelief.

Frosted, pale-bluish features stared back from the mirror!

As the chilling recognition spread through my body, gripping my heart, my pinched nostrils were full of the scent of fresh lemon *leaves*...I heard the melodic whisper: *The rules, the rules, Luis, they are made to protect us.* And I didn't need to ask: *From whom?* □

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CONTRIBUTORS

GREGORY BENFORD HAS SPENT AL-
most three decades as a leading
writer of Hard SF, as demon-
strated by his classic *Timescape*,
which won both the Nebula and
John W. Campbell Memorial Awards. His lat-
est novel, *Furious Gulf*, will appear in July
from Bantam Books, and the four previous
novels in the series will be reissued at that
time as a uniform edition with new matching
covers. Benford is also a Professor of
Physics at the University of California,
Irvine. The author wishes to note that his
story in this issue was written and pur-
chased prior to the recent California earth-
quake. **Bob Eggleton** has turned out cover
paintings for books by William Shatner,
James Michener, and Greg Bear, in addition
to *Sacred Visions*, Andrew Greeley's collec-
tion of Catholic SF stories.

Michael Bishop's newest novel *Brittle
Innings* has just been released. Recent an-
thology sales include short stories to *Heaven
Sent* and *Full Spectrum V*. Bishop will
shortly be taking part in a lecture at the
Brunswick Glynn Regional Library along
with writers Ursula Le Guin, John Kessel
and Jack McDevitt. **Martha Soukup** has re-
cently sold short stories to the anthologies
Alien Sex 2 and an as yet untitled book of
cat horror stories. Her short story "Things
Not Seen" has just made the Nebula Awards
final ballot.

In addition to numerous novels such as
Moonbane, *The Worms*, and *The Boy with
the Penny Eyes*, **Al Sarrantonio** has had
short stories published in *Heavy Metal*, *Twilight
Zone*, and all the major SF magazines.
He has also edited two volumes of humor,
The Fireside Treasury of Great Humor and
The Fireside Treasury of New Humor. He
lives in New York's Hudson Valley with his
wife and two sons.

Since his last publication in these pages,
Ray Aldridge has had two triumphs. Not
only has he become the father of another
child, but his novelette "The Beauty Addict"
from *Full Spectrum 4* has just made the final
Nebula ballot. He is hard at work on a mas-
sive new novel set on the exotic world of Dil-
vermoon which has been the stage for many

of his short stories. Readers seeking a com-
plete collection of his work will have to
track down copies of his boating articles in
Mid-Gulf Sailing and *Living Aboard*, as
Aldridge is an avid sailor. **Doug Andersen**
spent 10 years as a technical illustrator for
Lockheed and NASA, and has only recently
entered the commercial art field.. His nu-
merous game covers include *Dark Angel* and
Tir Tangiere, and he is currently working on
one for a *Robotech* project.



John Morressy

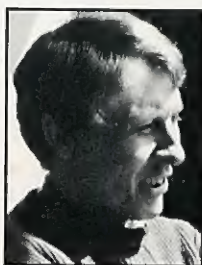


Gene O'Neill

FANS OF KENDRIGEN THE WIZARD
will be glad to hear that **John
Morressy** has recently completed
a novel based on his popular char-
acter, titled *Kendrigen and the
Dragon Comme il Faut*. Readers of this
magazine know him primarily as a writer of
fantasy, but he is now hard at work on a long
SF story which he says is very bitter and
dark. "I'm a fairly cheerful man," he said,
"but most of fiction that occurs to me is on
the dark side." Since his retirement from
Franklin Pierce College where he taught
English Literature and Milton, he has been
catching up on his painting and reading.

Paul Di Filippo has recently been devot-
ing himself to completing entries for the
forthcoming project *The Encyclopedia of
Fantasy*. As such, he has been deep in
rereading the complete works of his sub-
jects, which include Thorne Smith, A. A.
Milne, John Crowley, Mark Helprin, John
Barth, Donald Barthelme and others. **Doug
Chezem** has worked as a commercial air-
brush illustrator since 1974. He made the
transition from airbrush to electronic media
in 1986 and now specializes in digital paint-
ing. He has lectured on electronic art at
George Washington University and the Cor-
coran School of Art in Washington DC. He is
continuing to pursue photo-realistic illustra-
tion using computers and as well as a new
painting style that he calls "digital mixed
media."

Gene O'Neill has been published in *Twilight
Zone*, *F&SF* and elsewhere. He wishes
to thank Edgar Allan Poe for writing "The
Masque of the Red Death," which inspired
the story in this issue. □

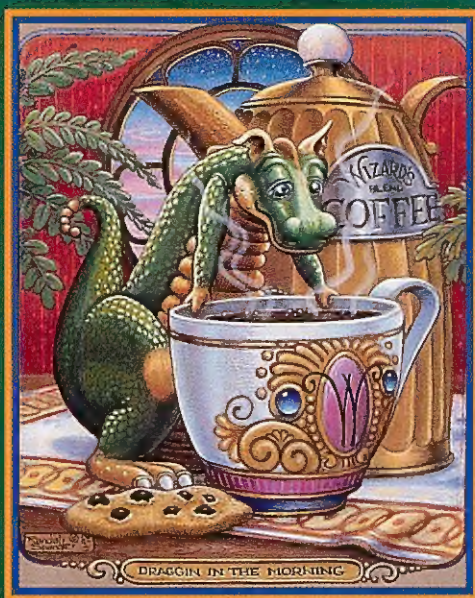


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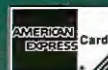
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